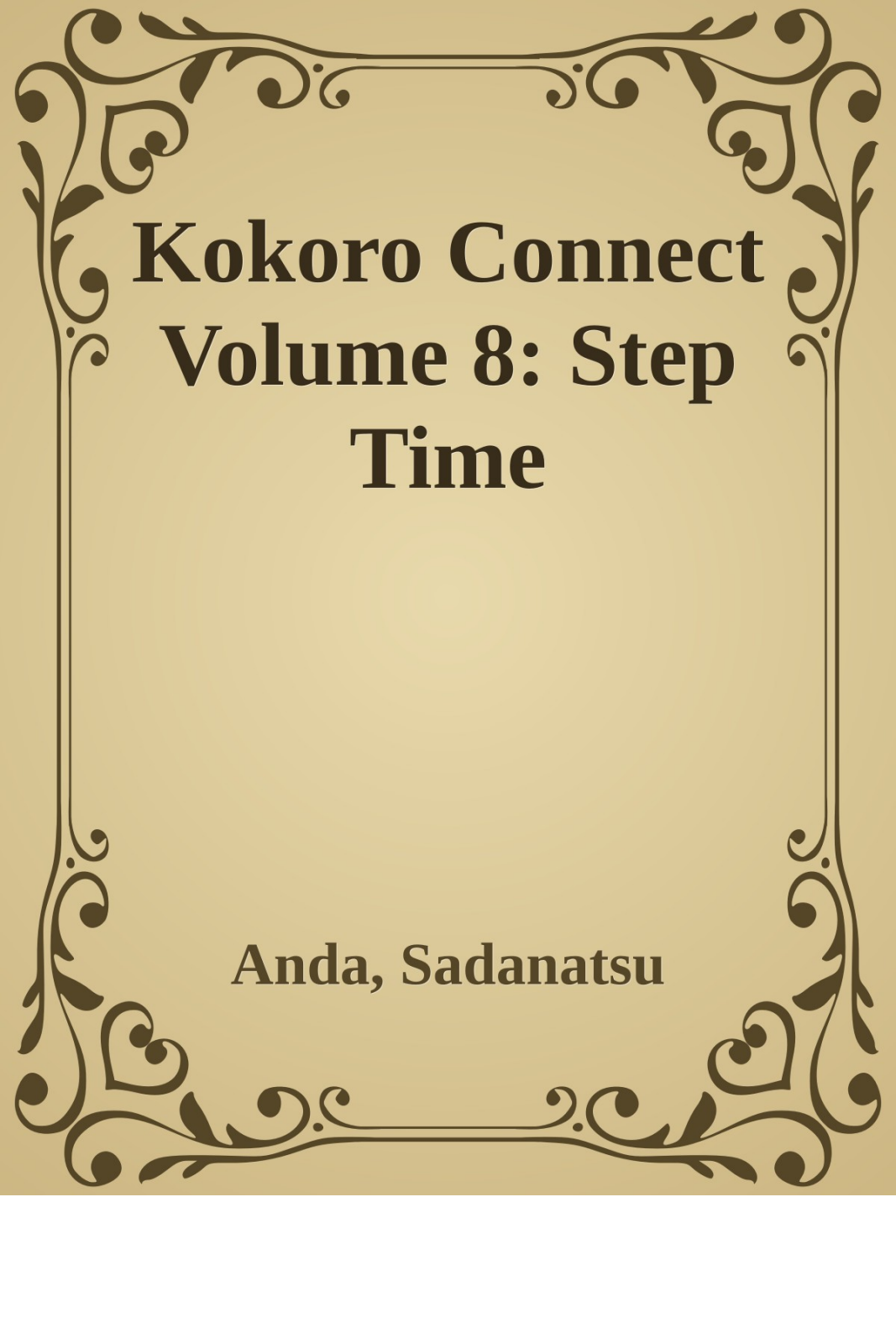


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Kokoro Connect Volume 8: Step Time

Anda, Sadanatsu

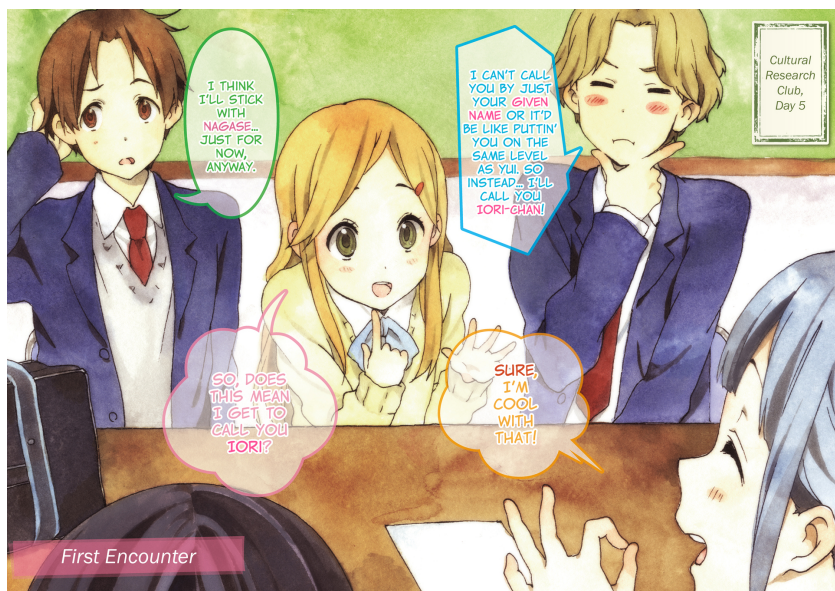
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KOKORO CONNECT







A Tale of Two Loners

Who
am I as a
person?
What do I
want to
achieve?

Furthermore,
I didn't have
a clue how to
interact with
the people
around me...
so I just
defaulted to
whatever I
thought they
wanted. And I
had a good
time doing it,
so clearly,
there was no
harm in it.

I didn't have
the answers,
so instead I
was just
passively
coasting
through life.

and I had
no intention
of straying
from it.

It was the
safest path
for a piece
of shit like
me,

Don't stick
your nose in
her business—
just leave her
be. Don't
make it weird.

This is how I
lived my life. I
desperately
avoided hurting
anyone—to
say nothing of
getting anyone
hurt. No—
and in
exchange,
I threw away
the chance
to make real
connections.



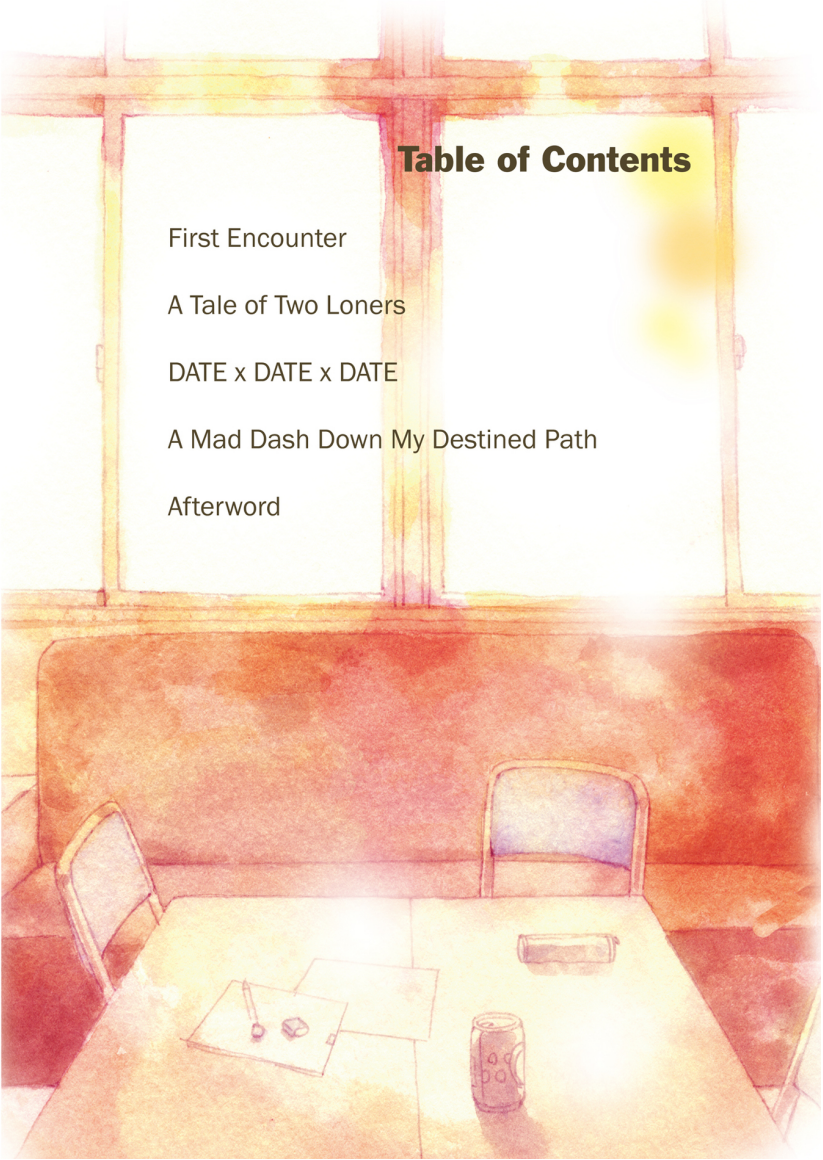


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First Encounter

At Yamaboshi High School, all students were obligated to take part in club activities.

At the start of their first year, they were required to choose a club from a ridiculously long list of potential options and submit a formal application before the deadline. It didn't matter whether the student in question was actually interested in clubs, or hoping to work part-time, or planning to go straight home and play video games each night. *All students, no exceptions.*

This application was then submitted to their class advisor by the end of April. Most were approved immediately. Then, starting in May, students were permitted to start participating in their chosen activity.

For the most part, that was the usual process at Yamaboshi. But this process was far from perfect. In every category exist outliers. And each year, a small handful of students would inevitably hit a snag. For example, perhaps the club they wanted to join didn't meet the minimum requirement of at least five members.

But outliers couldn't escape the system, and these students would inevitably be reallocated to an active club as necessary. When it came to *how* they were reallocated, well...

This year, the teachers didn't really feel like dealing with it—so they opted for something a little different.

—Day 1 According To Yaegashi Taichi—

Yaegashi Taichi and four other students accompanied Gotou Ryuuzen, advisor of Class 1-C, to the Rec Hall building.

“So this is where we'll be assigning you your clubroom for the Cultural Research Club. Just so you know, the room next door is empty, but... Look, kids, just don't get up to any funny business, you get what I mean?” Gotou grinned like a boy half his age as he opened the door to Room 401. “And—yep! Looks like the previous club left it nice and clean for you, so that'll save you some time! Come on in, everybody.”

At his prompting, the five students filed into the room. On the left wall, in the corner, was a metal locker, followed by some storage cabinets, with a weathered black sofa on the opposite side of the room. There were also a few cardboard boxes lying around, filled with random junk. On the right wall was a blackboard, and in the center of the room were two long tables with six folding chairs situated around them.

“Now then! As I explained, all you need to do now is decide on a club activity. I don’t care how much effort you put into it, but whatever it is, make sure it sounds good on paper, alright?”

Indeed, it was clear from his lighthearted tone that he sincerely didn’t care one way or the other.

“Once you’ve decided, come let me know. Apparently I’m gonna be your club supervisor. Seriously, you kids lucked out. I’m already supervising something else, y’know, technically. Anyway, have fun!”

And so, without waiting for any kind of response, Gotou saw himself out.

“Wh... Hey, wait! Gotou-sensei!” shouted Inaba Himeko, one of Taichi’s classmates in 1-C.

Inaba was a pretty girl, but in his limited experience with her, she was touchy and irritable. They’d been classmates for a full month, but Taichi had barely ever spoken to her; she tended to radiate hostile vibes that kept most people at bay.

“Are you listening?! I said—ugh, he’s gone.”

Sadly, her cries fell on deaf ears, as Gotou had already beaten a hasty retreat back to the staff room.

“That asshole’s way too lazy to be a teacher. People like that are a burden on society.”

“Now, now, Inaba-san. Remember what he told us? He’s trying to be friendly and approachable. And don’t forget, he wants us to call him by his nickname, Gossan,” explained Nagase Iori, another of Taichi’s classmates.

Nagase had exceptional good looks, to the point that Taichi had heard other guys in class raving countless times about how “hot” or “cute” she was. Her hair was tied back in a messy ponytail, almost like an afterthought, but she wore the look well.

“Gossan ? That’s the most idiotic nickname I’ve ever heard. I’m calling him Gotou, and that’s that.”

“B-But that’s so disrespectful...” whispered Kiriya Yui, from

Class 1-A.

The most noticeable thing about Kiriya was her long, chestnut-colored hair. Taichi had never spoken to her prior to today, but he remembered seeing some other girls coo over her (or at least, that's what it looked like) during their shared gym class. As he recalled, she seemed to have surprisingly good athletic abilities.

Not that any of that protected her from the sharp glare Inaba sent her way for her dissent. As if struck, she flinched and shrank away.

"Inaba-saaaan! No need to start mean-muggin' everybody! We're all stuck here, so we might as well be friends, amirite?" said Aoki Yoshifumi, Class 1-A, as he stepped in between the two.

Taichi recognized him from gym class, too. Tall and gangly, Aoki was always making jokes with a goofy grin on his face. It was hard not to notice a guy like that.

"Fuck off," Inaba spat.

"Wow, really?! We just met and already you're telling me to eff off?! That's a little aggro, don't you think?!" Aoki wailed melodramatically. In response, Inaba fixed him with a scornful scowl.

It was pretty clear the two of them weren't going to see eye to eye anytime soon, so Nagase stepped in once again to mediate.

"Now, now, everybody. Let's all just have a seat, shall we? Wait... Okay, I know I'm saying 'now, now' a lot today, but it's not my catchphrase or anything, got it?!"

"Literally *nobody* was going to accuse you of that," Taichi retorted under his breath.

At this, Nagase turned and stared directly into his eyes. Then she donned a smile sweeter than sugar itself.

Full disclosure, it made his pulse quicken.

Technically Gotou had introduced them all to each other earlier that morning, but for propriety's sake, they all went around the room introducing themselves once again. After that, their next topic was the task Gotou had saddled them with.

"Long story short... I guess we're the misfits who failed to get into an actual club," Inaba mused. Taking charge seemed to come as second nature to her, because she was already leading the discussion. She scoffed. "You'd think he'd reassign us individually, but instead we get this. The man's got balls, dumping us all into the

same club.”

“So now we’re all registered as members of this brand new ‘Cultural Research Club,’ right? What’s our, like, objective or whatever?” Kiriya asked.

“I think it was ‘a broader scope of research unfettered by existing frameworks,’ ” Nagase piped up.

Taichi nodded. “Which is pretty vague. I mean, that’s basically like saying ‘anything goes,’ don’t you think?”

“Anything goes?! So basically we can just screw around?! This club rocks!” Aoki shouted. He seemed to be the only one who didn’t feel any awkward tension in this room full of people he had only just met.

“Are you people actually serious about staying in this club?” Inaba asked, her level of enthusiasm the polar opposite of Aoki’s.

“Huh? Aren’t we already stuck here?” Aoki asked.

“Why the hell should we be stuck in some pointless—oh, I get it. All we have to do is make it so I still get to do the things I want to... Alright, well, I’m gonna need to use the data processing room, so we’d better apply for that.”

“What for?” Taichi asked.

“The great thing about this school is, it lets you access a ton of sites where you’d otherwise need a paid membership. And like I said, my hobbies are information gathering and analysis.”

“Okay, well, maybe *you* wanna do that, but—” Kiriya began.

“Yeah, I do. What of it?” Inaba asked in a challenging tone.

“Um...” Intimidated, Kiriya shrank down in her seat like an anxious bunny.

“Not like *you people* actually want to do anything important,” Inaba sneered, adding further fuel to the fire as she glanced around the room.

Taichi, for one, didn’t appreciate being condescended to—

“Th... *That’s not true* !” Kiriya shouted, her chair clattering behind her as she leapt to her feet.

Inaba blinked in surprise.

“You know what they say. Corner a cat and it’ll bite,” Taichi commented quietly.

“Nice one,” Nagase snickered.

With the spotlight now on Kiriya, her cheeks flushed red. She was clearly nervous... but nevertheless, she pushed bravely forward.

“I, um... I really like cute stuff! Like, sincerely! Cute stuff is

great because it makes people happy! So... yeah, I *do* think it's... important or whatever." Having said her piece, she returned to her seat.

Meanwhile, Aoki let out a whistle and started clapping. "You rock, Yui!"

"Wha...?! Will you *calm down*?! And another thing—I *told* you not to call me by my given name! You're just a stupid boy! A boy! A boy!"

We heard you the first time, Taichi thought. Evidently she had some kind of grudge against the male gender.

Out of nowhere, Nagase started laughing. "You guys seem like best friends!"

"No, we don't!" Kiriya snapped right as Aoki shouted "I know, right?!"

Evidently they weren't on the same page.

"That's a load of crap, Aoki-kun! Since when are we best friends?!"

"Since I decided we are!"

"Eww! You're delusional!"

And so Kiriya and Aoki continued to bicker for quite some time afterwards. Idly, Taichi wondered if they were like this in class, too. If so, then Nagase probably wasn't the only one who saw them as good friends.

Eventually the two of them settled down.

"Ugh... What a waste of my energy... Anyway, like, what were we talking about?" Kiriya asked.

"We have to figure out what our club activity's going to be, remember?" Taichi answered.

"Oh, that's right. Okay, um—"

"Hey, you," Inaba called.

"Yes?"

Just a moment ago Inaba was leaping down her throat, but now she seemed hesitant and uncertain. She scratched her head bashfully and averted her gaze. "Look, uh... I'm sorry for... talking shit about your hobby."

"Oh, um... that's okay," Kiriya replied, nodding.

And although the other three weren't directly involved, in that moment, somehow it felt like *all* of them had grown a little closer.

"Is it just me, or... is Inaba-san actually kind of adorable?" Nagase grinned.

“*Adorable* , my ass! What part of this is ‘adorable’?!” Inaba shouted, slamming her hand on the table.

“Wait... Adorable? Inaba-san? ...Oh my god, you’re right... Holy crap, how did I not see it before?! YES! She’s so *cute* !”

“God damn, Kiriyaama, calm down! You’re freaking me out! And both of you stop calling me cute! I’m not your fucking pet!”

“But being cute is what every girl dreams of!”

“Not this one!”

“Okay, got it!” Nagase clapped her hands together. “You want everybody to see you as a badass, and that’s why you swear so much! Right?”

For some reason Inaba seemed more offended by this than anything else. “Wh... I don’t do it for other people! This is just how I talk!”

“Hold up, Inaba-san! Why the heck would you *choose* not to be cute?! Like, on purpose?!”

“Don’t get pissy with me, Kiriyaama! God, I seriously don’t understand you people and your freaky hobbies!”

“What’s there not to understand?! Cute stuff is just... *cute* !”

“That doesn’t explain anything!”

Taichi spotted a chance to speak up. “For the record, when you say ‘you people’... are you including me and my love of pro wrestling?” he asked Inaba.

“No shit, idiot! What’s so great about a bunch of grown men throwing each other around?! It makes zero sense!”

“What’s there not to understand...? Pro wrestling is just... *pro wrestling*! ”

“Like I said, that doesn’t explain anything! Oh, and by the way? The 1980s called—they want their hobby back!”

“Hey! Take that back! You can dislike pro wrestling all you want, but don’t you *dare* look down on it!”

“They’re not even real fights! It’s just make-believe!”

“Haah... You non-fans just don’t get it. It doesn’t *matter* that it’s make-believe. Yes, pro wrestling is a scripted show. But it’s not about who wins or loses—it’s about who does a better job of entertaining the audience! Frankly, the word ‘show’ doesn’t quite capture its depth. Only ‘pro wrestling’ can perfectly depict—”

“Wow, Yaegashi-kun’s real chatty all of a sudden!” Aoki commented.

“He sounds like one of those annoying ‘well, actually’ guys!”

Nagase agreed.

“And here I thought maybe he was normal...” Kiriyaama sighed.

Inaba clucked her tongue. “This is why I can’t stand you fanboy types.”

“W-Was it something I said...?”

“Now that I think about it,” Inaba replied, “we were *all* marked as oddballs right from the moment we tried to join our various non-standard clubs, weren’t we? And for that matter, we still have no idea what *those two* even want to do.”

“I’m fine with whatever, as long as it’s fun! Then again, anything’s a blast with Yui here!” Aoki struck a triumphant pose.

Meanwhile, Kiriyaama flushed pink and started to panic. “I... I *told* you, quit imagining things! Don’t talk about me! Don’t even *think* about me!”

Was Aoki teasing her, or did he sincerely feel that way?

“Yeah. As long as the club’s fun in some way, I’m down for anything,” replied Nagase, the girl who had asked her teacher to decide on a club for her. She grinned.

In the end, the Cultural Research Club spent their first day making absolutely no progress in deciding on a club activity. That said, Taichi *did* get to know his new clubmates a little better.

Inaba Himeko had appeared prickly and aloof at first glance, but judging from the way she apologized to Kiriyaama, she seemed like she had a good head on her shoulders. Her foul mouth wasn’t representative of her personality in general; she was simply the sort of person who didn’t bother sugarcoating her opinions.

Kiriyaama Yui was a bit shy, but it was clear she was passionate about her interests (maybe even a little too passionate at times), and she was still brave enough to push back against the others, especially her classmate Aoki. She’d probably be a lot more fun once she opened up to them.

Similar to what Taichi had witnessed in their shared gym class, Aoki Yoshifumi seemed like the paragon of a “class clown” type. He didn’t even try to be subtle in his flirtations with Kiriyaama—but was he really just messing with her? Because it kind of felt like he was serious about it.

Last but not least, Nagase Iori. Truth be told, Taichi still wasn’t quite sure how to describe her. Obviously she was pretty, and really nice, and considerate, and funny... but it felt like there was

something more to her. Something he couldn't quite put his finger on...

In summary, they all seemed like nice, fun, and interesting people. That said, Taichi was a little concerned about the current gender split. After all, if Aoki was ever absent—if he was out sick or something—then Taichi would end up the only guy in a room full of girls. Talk about awkward. What would they even talk about at that point?

But the biggest problem by far was the club activity dilemma.

Taichi was a pro wrestling fan, and the very instant he found out there was a “Pro Wrestling Research Club,” his heart was set on joining it. But here in the Cultural Research Club, none of the other members were fellow fans. They didn't even seem interested in learning more about it (though they were free to change their minds at any time).

So what was the point of him staying in this club? Was he going to waste his entire high school career doing pointless nonsense?

Maybe it wasn't too late to switch clubs.

In middle school he was on the baseball team; his family had suggested to him that he should try out for the high school team, too. Not only that, but a friend in his class had invited him to join the soccer team.

If he didn't spend high school in a proper club, he'd regret it for the rest of his life... right?

Calmly, Taichi began to list out the pros and cons... and the more he thought about it, the more he started to feel like he needed to make a change. No matter how he looked at it, joining a sports team seemed like the objectively better choice from every angle.

He knew the Yamaboshi school rules forbade students from quitting a club outright, but he was pretty sure they were allowed to *switch* clubs instead... *I'd better check the student handbook to make sure.*

One thing Taichi noticed, however: for a group of people that had (for the most part) never spoken to each other prior to today, it felt like they'd all made friends with each other *really* quickly. One would think the two-guy, three-girl split would have made things awkward, but looking back, Taichi himself had felt pretty comfortable around them—almost like it wasn't really his first time meeting them.

Weird.

—Day 3 According To KiriYama Yui—

How could this happen?! I cursed myself silently.

My name is KiriYama Yui, and I love cute stuff. A lot.

As far as private schools went, Yamaboshi seemed like it was pretty lax in the rules department, so I was looking forward to showing off my style. And luckily for me, there were *soooo* many cute girls in my grade! (Trust me, I did my homework.) I knew I was right to choose Yamaboshi over that all-girls' school.

And when it came time to choose my club, I discovered the perfect choice: the Style Club. Oh, it was love at first sight! I *couldn't wait* to discover the glitz and glamour that awaited me when I arrived!

But sadly, what *actually* awaited me was...

"What if we all go watch a pro wrestling show once a month, then discuss the finer points together afterward?"

"Hmmm... Instead of trying to set up some kind of strict routine, why don't we all just take turns picking an activity for the day?"

"That does sound fun! But let's be real—if we do that, we're basically refusing to commit to anything at all. I mean, look at us! It's been two days 'n we haven't decided jack!"

Aoki was right. Instead of figuring out an activity for our new club, we'd spent the past couple days totally goofing off. But to be fair, why the heck would they make a club for us and then expect us to just "figure something out"? It felt, like, *completely* backwards.

"What do you think, Yui?" asked Aoki.

"I told you, stop—ugh..." Honestly, by this point, I was tired of yelling at him for using my given name. "Personally, I want to spend my club time looking for cute stuff, or making my own."

Then Inaba, who was sitting diagonally across from me, let out this *big* dramatic sigh. "That's what I don't understand. Why would you base a whole activity around something as subjective as 'cute'?"

I scowled. "Oh yeah? Then what's the point of your 'go on the internet and gather information' hobby? Like, what do you even need it for?"

"Information has all sorts of uses. For example..." She paused, gazing into my eyes. "Once upon a time, you were considered a karate prodigy."

She dug up my past?

"It's just handy to know these things, don't you think? If some

creep tries to attack me, you'll be the first person I call. Not that I expect that to ever happen."

"Wait, Kiriya-san does karate?" Nagase asked.

"That's badass, Yui!" Aoki shouted.

"If you like martial arts, there's a good chance you'd like pro wrestling," Yaegashi remarked.

"Th... That stuff's all in the past now," I explained, forcing a smile.

"My point is, we should spend our club time *productively* instead of pissing it away on bullshit. So let's just find things to research online. All I care about is getting to use the data processing room."

"But you're the only one who stands to gain anything from that," Nagase pointed out.

We had absolutely nothing in common with each other. Inaba was too... *pragmatic* or whatever. Aoki and Nagase only cared about having fun. Yaegashi would *not* stop talking about stupid pro wrestling. And as for me, my main focus was all things cute.

With our priorities all over the place, it was totally obvious we'd never be able to come to an agreement. And so we kept talking in circles... until Inaba finally lost her patience.

"I mean, we're just a ragtag bunch of misfits anyways! Why don't we all just do our own thing, write an essay about it, and turn it in?"

On one hand, it sounded like she was just spitballing stuff at random, but on the other hand, it was a lot better than any other suggestion thus far. Still...

"I don't like that," I said firmly. "It just... feels like we're cheating the system."

There was a pause as her razor-sharp glare stabbed into me.

"*Cheating the system?* Hah... Your life must be so painfully dull."

"Excuse me?!"

"But..." Inaba's stony expression melted into a soft smile I didn't know she was capable of making. "You're a good egg, Kiriya."

"A good... egg...?"

It was so sudden, I couldn't process it right away. Then, steadily, it set in.

"A good egg... Heehee..." Pleased, I smiled to myself.

"What a simpleton," she scoffed. I ignored her.

All at once, Nagase lit up like fireworks. "Wait—didn't something like this happen last time, too?! Do I sense a *romantic*

spark , perhaps?! Are you two gonna get it on?!”

Then Aoki started yelling for some reason. “Tell me it’s not true, Yui! What about me?! Where do I fit into all this?!”

“Don’t make this weird, you assholes!” Inaba snapped.

“Y-Yeah, what she said!” I chimed in. “To be totally clear, my love for cuteness applies to people too, and while Inaba-san’s more ‘beautiful’ than ‘cute,’ I’m still more than happy to mess around with her. Oh, and while I’m on the subject, I *really* want to mess around with you too, Nagase-san. Your cuteness is like, certifiable! But just so you know, when I say ‘mess around,’ I’m *not* talking about anything weird. I mean like what kittens do when they play together—huh?”

Suddenly, I realized everybody was staring at me. And they looked... uncomfortable.

“...Uh, guys? What’s the matter?” I asked.

Seriously, what’s gotten into them? No, okay, let’s think this through. Maybe I... said something weird...? Something that... gives them the wrong idea about me...?

“G-Guys, no! It’s not *that* , okay?! I just like everything that’s cute, and girls are cute, so—b-but not in a weird way! Argh!”

The more I explained, the more it felt like I was digging a deeper hole for myself.

Then Taichi spoke up.

“So what you’re saying is... you’re a girl who likes other girls... which means...”

“NOOOO! ”

FALSE! I admit, I’m not comfy with boys, but NO! I am 100% NOT into girls like that! Right? Right! Okay, now I just need to explain to them that they have the wrong idea! Uhhh...

“Just... no! I’m not! I, um...”

Some kind of explanation! Anything! But first, I need to calm down! Everyone’s looking at me! I just... Ugh, I can’t handle this right now!

“Grrrrrrrr!”

Frustrated, I bolted from the room before I could even process why I was running.

Behind me, I heard Nagase ask, “You need to be more discreet with this stuff, Yaegashi-kun!”

Ugh, I’m totally going to die of embarrassment!

“Yui! Where the heck are you going at 100 kilometers an hour?!” one of my friends from class shouted after me as I ran out

of the Rec Hall and across the athletic field.

“Stop, Yui!” another called.

It wasn’t that late, but their club activities were already over for the day, and now they were leaving campus to go hang out downtown.

Yamaboshi had a lot more clubs than the average high school, and so they all had to take turns using the field or gym. Naturally, club activities ended early on days when they couldn’t use the space they needed.

“Look, Yui, you should really just join me on the track team. Your godlike speed is going to waste!” said Yukina, the friend I ate lunch with all the time.

“Godlike speed ? Oh, please.”

“No, seriously! I just watched you run all the way across the field! Not sure why you were clutching your face and tearing your hair out, but still... Ugh, I’m tempted to give up and go throw my track shoes in the trash.”

I really don’t think I was running faster than a track athlete, but whatever. “But—”

“If not track, then how about basketball? We don’t have a lot of members, so you’re practically guaranteed a spot on the lineup! Real talk, I’ve been *dying* to recruit you ever since I saw that crazy vertical jump you pulled off on the first day of school!” Kaori gushed.

“Basketball? I’m not good at those kinds of sports...”

“What? After the way you played in gym class?! Ugh, now *I* want to throw *my* shoes in the trash.”

“That’s a mood,” Yukina nodded.

No, seriously, you guys! I’m really not that talented!

“Trust me, you don’t want me. I mean, I...”

I already gave up on my passion once, so to me, you guys are the real superstars.

“I guess if you were going to join an athletic club, it’d be karate, huh? That’s your specialty,” Yukina mused.

“Wait, what? You do karate? That’s so cool!” Kaori exclaimed.

“I... I’m actually on break from karate right now. I quit a long time ago, so... it’s all in the past.”

Yeah... It’s all in the past.

“Well, anyways! I don’t know what you guys even do in the ‘Cultural Research Club’ or whatever, but you should totally switch

to a sports team instead,” said Yukina.

“Yeah! Your talents are totally going to waste. Like, it’d make sense if your club was at least working towards some kind of goal, but you aren’t!” said Kaori.

“Nngh...” I didn’t really have a counterargument.

Truth be told, I could see their points. Our club didn’t have a goal or even a set activity. It was totally pointless in every way... The other members were pretty cool, though.

Yaegashi Taichi was a pro wrestling fanboy who always made snarky comments under his breath, but I liked his open honesty.

Inaba Himeko seemed really intimidating at first, but after getting to know her, I realized she actually wasn’t all that scary. In fact, I was pretty sure she was actually a total sweetheart deep down.

Nagase Iori was *really* cute. Like, totes adorbs. Plus, she had a fun, outgoing personality, so she was actually kind of perfect? But for some reason, I kept sensing this... *darkness* from her every now and then. Or was I just imagining it?

Lastly, Yoshifumi Aoki... Frankly, I didn’t really enjoy thinking about him. I knew he liked me, but... *Sorry. No, really. It’s not your fault, but yeah...*

I could see myself getting along with them just fine, but... their values were just so different from mine. We all wanted different things from the club. And because of that, it was hard to picture us coming together to unite around a common goal.

Would I be able to accomplish anything important in this club? What about on a sports team? What’s the purpose of doing club activities? What is achieved if those activities are pointless? It’d be one thing if I chose this club of my own free will, but I didn’t.

Truth be told, Yukina and Kaori weren’t the only ones trying to recruit me to their teams. And at one point, I found out that there’s an exception to the five-member minimum rule: *Should the member count dip below the minimum after the club has already gained approval, the club will remain in effect for the rest of the school year.* In other words, me quitting the Cultural Research Club wouldn’t cause any problems for any of the other members.

I had already made my peace with quitting karate forever, so if I was going to join an athletic club, it wouldn’t be that one... Maybe it was time for me to start giving it some thought.

Your talents are going to waste . Did I really have talent? That seemed like an exaggeration.

Still...

Granted, I was a fairly loud and energetic person, but normally I would never yell like that in front of people I barely knew. It felt way too early to claim that we'd all made friends with each other, but at the same time... somehow I already felt right at home with them.

And one last thing I noticed: I didn't feel all that nervous around Yaegashi and Aoki. For some reason they were just a little less scary than the average guy.

But if I could just figure out why that was, maybe I—

—Day 5 According To Aoki Yoshifumi—

Five days had passed since Gotou told us “As of today, you're all in the Cultural Research Club” and dropped us off at the clubroom, and now it was Friday.

As for me, Aoki Yoshifumi, I'd made a point of showing up at Rec Hall Room 401 every day after school. Sadly, the discussion had made absolutely no progress.

“Hey, I know! Let's all give each other nicknames!” Nagase declared, throwing everything off track.

“Nicknames? What for?” asked Yaegashi.

“I mean, we're all clubmates now, aren't we? We can't keep calling each other ‘Surname-san’ and ‘Lastname-kun’ like we're strangers!”

Classic Nagase, back at it again with another great suggestion. “Yes! I'm down! I'm so down!” I shouted, raising my hands into the air. We needed nicknames to help break the ice!

“Pass. Sounds stupid,” Inaba complained with a scowl. But Nagase didn't back down.

“C'mon, don't be a wet blanket, Inaba-san! They don't all have to be goofy—we could always just do given names instead!”

“Oh, I see. So when you say ‘let's give each other nicknames,’ what you mean is ‘let's figure out how we're going to refer to each other.’”

“That's the spirit, Yaegashi-kun! Speaking of which... Me personally, I can't *stand* calling you ‘Yaegashi-kun.’ Too many syllables! I feel like I stumble over it every time!”

“Oh... Sorry...”

You don't gotta apologize, dude, I thought to myself. Maybe I should've said that one out loud.

“Okay, let's see... Something for Yaegashi-kun... Uhhh... Yaa-kun... Yaeccchi... Yaa-chan... Yaa-kun-san...”

“Nagase, whatever you do, please don't call me that last one. People are going to think I'm a *yakuza* .”

Can't argue there, I thought.

“Hmmm... Your given name is... Taichi, right? Taichi... Hmm... Taichi. Yeah, Taichi feels right.”

“*Taichi* ,” I repeated aloud, testing the water. “Yeah, that fits. Really rolls off the tongue, too. Perfecto!”

“I don't mind it coming from Aoki, but when it's a girl using my given name, it feels... I don't know. Intense.”

“Oh, relax! You're reading way too much into it. You guys don't mind, right?” Nagase asked Yui and Inaba.

“T-Taichi... Okay, Taichi. Got it,” Yui nodded to herself like she was psyching herself up for it.

Wait, why is she blushing? Is she embarrassed to call a guy by his given name? She doesn't have any special feelings for him, does she? Nah, no way. And if she does, well, we can cross that bridge when we get to it.

“I didn't have a problem calling him Yaegashi, but... alright, Taichi it is. Saves me time, I guess... Ugh. Great, now you've roped me into it.” Inaba seemed unexcited, but otherwise willing.

Hey, at this rate maybe I can get Yui to call me Yoshifumi! Or some kind of cute nickname! The perfect opportunity to deepen our bond!

“Uno!”

“Uh, Aoki-kun? What was *that*? ” Yui asked dubiously.

“Huh? Oh, I dunno. I just figured, if this was a game of Uno, this would be the time to say it, y'know?” *Not that I'd know. I've never played Uno before.*

“Wh... What does any of this have to do with Uno...?” She fixed me with a dismal look.

Not to worry—I knew this was the last time she'd ever look at me this way. Once we decided on my nickname, it'd be time to make my comeback... Not that I was losing or anything!

“Now for Kiriyama-san... Your friends call you Yui, right? It's a cute name all on its own,” Nagase suggested.

“Yeah... That's what a lot of my classmates call me.”

"Including me! Oh, but... I kinda wish I was the only one who got to call you that... y'know, so I could be special..." *Relatable, am I right?*

"Oh yeah? Well, *I* wish you were the only one who *couldn't* call me that!"

Ah, the lady doth protest too much! Deep down, I know she's fine with it... I mean, it's not like she's just resigned herself to it because she knows she can't stop me, right?

Right?

"Yui, huh... Well, um... it feels like a pretty big step for me, so could I stick with Kiriyama until we get to know each other a little better?" asked Taichi.

"Oh, come on, Taichi! Get with the program!" Nagase insisted.

"What's the matter, Taichi? Are you worried I'll feel threatened by it?" I asked. "Well, don't be. I'm not that insecure, trust me."

"*It's not about you*," Taichi and Nagase shot back in unison. *Nice timing, you two.*

"It's just... awkward, that's all."

"You totally don't have to force yourself before you're ready."

"C-Cool. Thanks for understanding, Kiriyama."

Wait... Why's she so nice to Taichi?

"Well, no matter what happens, I'll always call you Yui!"

"You be quiet!"

Huh... She's still so harsh with me. I'll just assume it's proof that she cares.

"So, does this mean I get to call you Iori?" Yui asked Nagase.

"Sure, why not? A few of my classmates already do, and it makes sense."

"Iori... Hmmm. I can't call you by *just* your given name or it'd be like puttin' you on the same level as Yui. Can't have that." Plus, if I went around calling a bunch of girls by their given names, I'd sound like a total player. "So instead... I think I'll call you Iori-chan!"

"Sure, I'm cool with that!" She curled her fingers in an "okay" gesture. As usual, she was totally down to clown.

Speaking purely in terms of enthusiasm, I got the sense I was most compatible with Iori-chan... but in my view, that compatibility didn't always translate to romantic chemistry. Maybe some people could fall in love based entirely on specific aspects of a girl, but not me. I was a "whole package" kind of guy.

"I think I'll stick with Nagase... just for now, anyway."

"Jeez, Taichi, you're such a coward!" Iori-chan joked, batting her lashes at him as she shot him a puppydog look.

"Nngh... Nagase, quit looking at me like that! It's... It's illegal!"

Apparently this was super-effective on Taichi. Personally, I could relate. It was hitting *me* pretty hard, and she wasn't even aiming for me.

"Illegally cute, you mean?"

"No! Er, well—I guess so, yeah..."

Iori-chan giggled. "Oh my god, you're *blushing*!"

She's got him right in the palm of her hand... Note to self: Iori-chan's more than just a pretty face. She's a force to be reckoned with!

"Ugh... God, you're so cute, Iori! I'm all aflutter over here!"

"Yui, I thought you said you *didn't* have the hots for Iori," Inaba retorted. *Well now, look at that. Even Miss Grump is using their given names just fine.*

"I mean, Iori-chan's cute and all... but Yui will always be my number one!"

"Will you quit making every conversation about me?! It's, like, so obvious that you don't mean a word of it! You're so shallow, you're a kiddie pool!"

So she says... and yet she's clearly flustered. I know it's working. Slow and steady wins the race!

"Just FYI, I don't like people using my given name," Inaba warned. "Stick to Inaba."

Sheesh, what an ice queen. How'd you make any friends in middle school with that attitude?

"Awww, but Himeko's so cute!" Yui complained.

"I don't like it. End of story."

"Yeah... Fair enough. I guess I'll stick to Inaba... but I'm heartbroken about it!"

"Personally, I'm right at home calling you Inaba."

"What's with that little smile, Taichi?!" Iori-chan shouted. Then she let out a sigh. "I was really hoping we'd get to call you Hime-chan or something... Inaba just feels so *formal*, you know? Hmm... Inaba-chan... Ina-chan... Inaban... Ooh, I really felt that one! Yes! I'm going with Inaban!" All at once, her expression lit up.

Somehow Iori-chan exuded this... *radiant* optimism, so bright it was almost dazzling. But it didn't feel quite natural—more like a spotlight instead of sunshine.

“Well, uh... sure, knock yourself out. I don’t see how adding an N at the end changes anything, but whatever.”

“Okay then, I’ll go with Inaban, too! ...Mmm, no, it doesn’t feel quite right. Inaba... Inaba-chan... Inabacchan! Perfect!”

But Inabacchan herself didn’t seem to agree.

“All you did was make my name *longer* . Wouldn’t it be easier to just call me Inaba?”

“Oh, calm down, *Inaban* ,” Iori-chan teased. “That’s not what this is about.”

Exactly! N-Now then...

“Alright, guys! Last but not least, it’s finally my turn! What’s my nickname gonna be? Go ahead and lay it on me!”

By this point the mood in the room had warmed up considerably, and everyone had gotten into the full swing of nicknaming. My hopes were high.

“...Uh, guys? Hello?”

Nothing.

“Let’s hear some suggestions! Come on!”

Zilch.

“Is the silence deafening in here, or is it just me?!” Why won’t any of them play along?!

“Ummm... What’s your given name again? Yoshifumi?” asked Iori-chan.

“Yeah!”

“*Welllll ...*”

“Where’d all your enthusiasm go, Iori-chan?! You were full of ideas for everyone else!”

“Honestly, I’m kinda tired of it now.”

“But we’re right at the finish line! Just one last push!”

Don’t give up now! Not when we’re so close!

“Fine, fine. I’ll take over for the last one,” said Yui.

“Yes! I couldn’t ask for anyone better to decide mine!”

It felt like we were finally building a connection. I couldn’t wait to hear what sort of nickname she would give me—

“Honestly, like, don’t you think he’s fine as just Aoki?”

“...What?” I froze. Was she saying they should just... call me by my family name? *That’s it?*

“Yeah, Aoki’s good enough,” Iori-chan nodded.

“W-Wait a minute! Can’t you guys put at least a little more effort into it?!”

“Calm down, Aoki,” said Taichi.

“You’re the bottom of the totem pole. Get used to it,” said Inabacchan.

“Wh-Why...? Why am I being singled out...?!”

I slumped forward onto the table and hid my face in my arms. How could they be so mean to me?

Sadly, no other important decisions were made that day. I’ll admit, even I was starting to ask myself, *what’s even the point?* Granted, there was nothing wrong with the members themselves.

Yaegashi Taichi seemed a bit too serious for my taste, but I liked him. He’d probably be more fun once he loosened up a bit.

Inaba Himeko was another serious type, and she didn’t seem to want to open up to us quite yet, but I could tell she was a sweetheart deep down. Despite all her complaining, she always showed up after school. And even though she wasn’t enthused about the nickname discussion, she agreed to it all the same.

Nagase Iori was cute, cheerful, and a good sport—basically perfect. I could tell why all the guys in our grade were obsessed with her. And yet... why was there this voice in the back of my mind, questioning whether she was actually having fun with us? Was I just overthinking it?

Kiriyama Yui—well, this one’s easy. She was adorable. Mega adorable. Like, she was basically in her own separate category. After all, I had a crush on her.

Honestly, when Gotou summoned us all to the staff room and told us we were gonna be in the same club, I was sure it was destiny... Okay, I was already convinced it was destiny from the moment we were assigned to the same class, but this just solidified it.

The first time I saw her in the classroom, I noticed that she looked a lot like someone I used to know. That was my first impression of her. But pretty soon after that, it was like, *pow* ! It struck me in the heart, right down to my core. So I guess *that* was my real first impression.

The shape of her face... Her long, pretty hair... Her small stature and athletic body type... I liked a lot of her physical traits, so in that sense, maybe it was love at first sight. But not in the way most people think of the term. What I fell for wasn’t just her appearance—it was something else. Something more than that.

Granted, I'm not sure why I'm so convinced about this. Not like I have it all analyzed. But whatever that feeling was, I could tell it was important. And if I managed to piece it together, I got the sense that my life would get a whole lot more interesting. Why? No idea. But I want to find out.

So here we are, stuck in the same club. Nobody's decided what it is we're doing, but if you turn that on its head, it kinda means we're free to do anything, and that sounds pretty awesome. But more than that, I mean, Yui's there... and Yui's there... and Yui's... Yep, 'nuff said!

But now it occurs to me... What if Yui *wasn't* there? Unthinkable, I know, but hear me out. What if, hypothetically, she left the club? Would I stay?

Obviously I can't follow Yui to the next club like some kind of stalker. But since we're here together, I want to see it through to the end.

A big part of my motivation for staying in the Cultural Research Club is the knowledge that Yui will be there. But what if she stops coming? Will I still want to be in the club? Can we really unite under a common goal when our interests are so different?

At the end of the day, all I really care about is having fun. But "fun" is more complicated than you'd think. "Fun" doesn't mean we all sit silently in the same room and do our own separate thing.

People always tend to conflate "fun" with "easy," but they're sooo wrong. In that case, can the Cultural Research Club rise to the challenge and find a group activity that's genuinely fun?

At the rate we're going, it looks like the answer is no. Still...

Granted, I acknowledge that a lot of the time I end up in the "butt monkey" role, like earlier during the nickname discussion... but usually it didn't happen... that fast. What made the Cultural Research Club so special?

Come to think of it, when the five of us first met, I felt it—I felt the *pow* of destiny. At first I just assumed it was 'cuz Yui was there, but looking back, maybe it was more than that. So who was I vibing with? Or was it the whole club in general?

In that case, maybe I—

—Day 8 According To Inaba Himeko—

Before I knew it, Monday had rolled around once again. And thinking back on the past week of after-school activities—if you could even call it that—I had to ask myself: *What the fuck am I doing?*

We hadn't accomplished anything of value; we just sat on our asses and made small talk all week long. *But holding hands and singing kumbaya doesn't get shit done... Damn it, why am I blaming myself for this? I did nothing wrong!* I could feel my frustration building.

Once again, after school I found myself in Rec Hall Room 401 with my four fellow club members—ugh, “fellow” club members? *Getting real cozy with them already, aren't we?*

“Remind me again why they're making us do this shit? Is Gotou just dicking around or what?”

“You just refuse to call him Gossan, don'tcha, Inaban?” Iori replied cheerfully, but I ignored her.

“Think about it! If we called it in, we could probably get someone fired. I can see the headlines now: *Teacher Forces Students Into Club Against Their Will* .”

“But it's our fault for not committing to a real club by the deadline,” Taichi pointed out. Annoyingly enough, he had a point.

“Hmph. With a little more time, I could've revived the Data Processing Club. All I had to do was poach enough members from the Computer Club or somewhere... It'd be easier if you guys would just agree to see things my way.”

Unfortunately, that dream was already crushed, since last week was the deadline for club creation and/or revival.

“We're stuck here. Just get over it already,” Yui sighed. “Then again, if he was going to pick our club for us, I kinda wish he would've assigned us to one that, like, already existed instead of making some random new one.”

“Y-Yui?! How could you say that?! He brought us together, man!”

“Yeah, and I wish he hadn't! I'm miserable enough as it is just sharing a class with you! I must be cursed or something!”

We were barely a month into the first semester, and already Yui and Aoki had established a rapport. *These people are WAY too comfortable with each other. I could never be like that.*

“I mean, you could've asked him to put you somewhere else. We all had that option.”

“Why do you always have to be right about everything, Taichi?”

There I was, calling a guy by his first name like it was the most natural thing in the world. But it wasn’t natural—it was *weird*. To me, anyway.

“I mean, I get it. If I’d known it would turn out like this, I would’ve picked a more normal club myself,” he continued.

“Oh yeah? You can relate, huh, Taichi?” Again with the first name.

“Well, yeah, of course. Don’t we all?”

“Yeah...”

I was starting to think maybe I should wash my hands of club activities altogether. You know, find a club with a lot of other members and then accidentally forget to show up for the next three years. As it stood, I’d have a lot of trouble ghosting the Cultural Research Club, since I shared a class with half the members and saw the other half in gym. Then again, I could always just flat-out *tell* them I wasn’t going to show up.

What was the *point* of club activities, anyway? I never joined any clubs in middle school—just went straight home instead. And I would’ve done the same thing in high school too, except this time clubs were mandatory. Without that rule, I would’ve been at home right now, spending my time a lot more productively.

This club was just one big waste of my time. What was the point of getting all buddy-buddy? Not even Yui or Taichi saw any inherent value in this club. And as for Iori and Aoki, they weren’t all that preoccupied with “value” to begin with; they were only in it for the fun of it, so they’d be just as happy somewhere else.

So what was the point of this club existing at all?

Then the door opened, and in walked Gotou Ryuuzen, advisor to Class 1-C, supervisor for the Cultural Research Club, and mastermind behind this entire ordeal.

“...So, to sum it all up: things were a little hectic back when the club was first created, so I kinda skipped a few steps when I approved it, and now some folks are taking issue with the, uh, lack of detail on the forms, and they want me to outline what exactly you’ll be producing and how you plan to do it. Otherwise they’re going to disband the Cultural Research Club and move you all somewhere else.”

His tone was so casual, like it was no big deal, and I found

myself desperately wanting to punch him.

“So, you guys have two options. Option #1: decide what you’re doing and how. From what they told me, all that matters is that you create something tangible. Option #2: pick a different club. Pretty straightforward, eh?”

“Wait, wait, wait. Back up. So you’re saying it’s not too late to disband the club?” I asked. For some reason I thought we were all stuck here.

“Hmm? Yeah, totally. Think of it as, y’know, temporary housing or something.”

“What, like a homeless shelter?” Yui muttered.

Seriously? Is that all this is? Here I was, thinking I needed to actually give a shit about this club he made for us without asking. Apparently not.

“Anyway, there’s your status update. Once you’ve decided, come and talk to me. But if you want to keep this club alive, you’ve only got two days to figure out what you’re doing. Make it quick.”

“Wh-What? We’ve only got *two days* to find a new club to join?” I asked in disbelief. I was convinced these people had to be out of their minds.

“No, no, no. If you folks can’t come up with a game plan for the Cultural Research Club in two days, then we’ll just assume you all want to be transferred to a different club. We’ll worry about *that* deadline later on down the line,” Gotou shrugged. “Anyway, have fun!”

And with that, he left the room.

“Hmmm... Sounds stressful,” Iori commented once he was gone.

“I know, right? Now we got two days to figure out what the heck our club’s gonna do,” Aoki agreed.

“Not necessarily,” I cut in. “First, we should ask ourselves... Do you see any reason to stay?”

Gotou had made me realize something: the five of us had all subconsciously assumed that disbanding this club was inherently a bad thing. After all, it was created expressly for us, and this engendered feelings of obligation that otherwise prevented us from quitting on the spot, to say nothing of letting the club disband altogether. Whether we liked it or not, they’d already put us down as the “Cultural Research Club” in the school system, and it would be awkward to object to it this late in the game.

But *all of us* were skeptical about staying. Nobody chose this.

And deep down, I knew we were all questioning if we might be better off in a normal club. A club we chose of our own volition. A club that wasn't quite so fucking pointless.

And now the barriers to quitting the club had been lifted completely. Nothing was stopping us. For the past week, we were just kind of going with the flow—but now we'd have to do more than that if we wanted to keep the Cultural Research Club alive. The "flow," in other words, had been reversed.

Who among us would bother fighting it?

"You don't want to stay in the Cultural Research Club, Inaban?" Iori asked weakly.

"I..." I began, but couldn't find the words to continue.

"What about you, Taichi? Yui? Aoki?" She glanced around anxiously at the others.

"I was just kind of going along with it, to be honest," Taichi replied. "But now that I think about it, I was never really that attached to this specific club... and a friend of mine is trying to recruit me to *his* club... and even my family thinks I should quit..." He trailed off vaguely.

"Same here," Yui chimed in. "I mean, real talk, this club isn't what I was hoping for. And like with Taichi, I've got other people asking me to join their clubs instead... so I've been thinking about why I'd want to stay in this one, and... well..." She fell silent.

"Me personally, uh... I haven't really thought about it," Aoki replied sheepishly. Even *he* didn't have a concrete answer.

Not one of them could come up with a definitive reason to stay.

"...Gotcha," Iori muttered in a low voice. Then she hung her head—but right at the last moment, I caught a glimpse of her expression.

A shiver ran down my spine, chilling me to the bone. Her face was perfectly blank, like a mannequin. *What happened to your happy-go-lucky routine?*

Yui and Aoki both stared awkwardly at the ground. The mood in the room was murderously tense; I couldn't bear to look at them. They were all in my field of vision, but I didn't focus on them. Instead, I intentionally chose to ignore the visual information I was receiving.

"Who here *wanted* to be in this club? Nobody, right?" I asked.

They looked at me.

"I mean, why make a club when you haven't even decided what

its purpose is?”

I ignored them.

“Kind of pointless, don’t you think?”

Pointless. Pointless. Pointless.

“We have absolutely nothing in common. None of us want to be here. And it’s not like we’ve already accomplished anything together, so we have no attachment to this club in particular. Right?”

After all, an organization without a common cause wasn’t much of an organization—just a random selection of people who sat in a room together. What was the point of us meeting up at all?

“My point is... why would any of us want this ‘Cultural Research Club’ to stay alive?”

There was simply no logical explanation for it.

In the end, we packed up to leave in silence. Our deadline was in just two days, and yet we didn’t even discuss whether we’d meet up again tomorrow or the day after.

Alone, I headed home for the day. At the rate we were going, we could kiss the Cultural Research Club goodbye... Not that its members were all that annoying, for the record.

Yaegashi Taichi was stupidly honest and stupidly obsessed with pro wrestling—okay, maybe he was stupid in a lot of ways—but I could appreciate his open, straightforward demeanor. Stupid people were typically pretty genuine like that. That said, I could picture him charging headfirst into trouble.

Kiriyama Yui struck me as immature, simple-minded, and a little vapid. In other words, she was another moron, and not the kind I could get along with. However, I could tell she was possessed of a pure heart and a lot of integrity. Definitely a good egg.

But Aoki Yoshifumi was the biggest dumbass of all—so laid-back, his brain has probably never put in an honest day’s work in his life. A complete simpleton. It was kind of impressive, actually.

Lastly, there was Nagase Iori. With her cheerful personality, I could see why she was popular with guys and girls alike... but every now and then, I got the sense that there was something more lurking under the surface. Like that frigid expression I’d glimpsed earlier today, for example. Perhaps we were kindred spirits... I’d need to get to know her a little better first.

In summary, none of the existing members rubbed me the

wrong way. Naturally, however, this didn't automatically translate to a reason to keep the club alive. The Cultural Research Club was an anomaly, born of a flaw in the Yamaboshi system; it was an error, and errors were meant to be corrected.

Granted, I was never one for "camaraderie" in the first place. I saw no point in getting all buddy-buddy with the randos who happened to share a class or club with me. That would only lower my guard and put me at risk. After all, who could hurt me more easily than a friend?

The answer to that question, of course, was *me* .

My chest felt uncomfortably heavy.

—*Are you sure this loneliness is what you want?*

Shut up. I'm not lonely, okay? All I want is a little distance. I don't need friends... I just need the courage to go it alone. I don't need other people; I just need to be strong.

Still...

It was kind of strange how natural it felt to call everyone (with the exception of Aoki) by their first names. I had to admit it—we were already on good terms with each other. And with them, I somehow fit in more easily than I ever had in my entire life. Why? How? I couldn't begin to understand it. It made me sick. Sick to my stomach.

It was just so sickeningly warm.

...*Wait, "warm"? Why would warmth make me feel sick? What's going on with me?*

The feeling was familiar, but I couldn't quite place it. All I knew was that every time I'd encountered this feeling in the past, I'd run from it at full speed. But was that really what I wanted? Maybe I—

—Day 8 According To Nagase Iori—

Alone in the clubroom—if we could even still call it that—I stared blankly up at the ceiling.

We'd barely spent any time in here, and yet it already felt like home to me. And I wasn't just acting, either; I sincerely meant it from the bottom of my heart. At least, I was pretty sure I did. I could feel something there, and it was real, albeit faint. Even I was having trouble believing it.

I shifted my gaze from the ceiling to the recently vacated folding chairs.

Inaba Himeko was, at first glance, an unfriendly pragmatist who didn't put much stock in social bonds... and yet I got the sense she was actually a deeply emotional person who was trying her best to keep a level head at all costs. I was curious to see what she was like beneath the mask.

Kiriyama Yui was the sweet, energetic ingénue of the group. I could appreciate a girl who was willing to wear her emotions on her sleeve; it made me want to get to know her better. Maybe she'd rub off on me.

Aoki Yoshifumi was always a blast to hang out with. At times he seemed to cross the threshold of laid-back and enter straight-up thoughtless territory—but to me, that wasn't necessarily a bad thing, per se. More than that, however, something told me he was acting like this for a reason. Maybe it was part of his philosophy.

Lastly, Yaegashi Taichi was a charming guy whose biggest flaws were his brainless fanboyism and brainless honesty... but at the same time, I could sense that there was more to him than just that. I couldn't put my finger on it. It was like a strong beacon of light that could get snuffed out at any moment.

Bottom line, they were all good people in their own unique ways, and I felt like I could stand to gain a lot from being around them. But now the one thing holding us together was gone. No one wanted to be in the Cultural Research Club—not even me. Or to put it more precisely, I didn't have the first clue what I wanted. At all.

But although I lacked insight into my own desires, I still had feelings like any other human being. And when I was with them, it just felt *right*. Did I belong with them? Maybe I did, maybe I didn't. But that didn't matter so much. They were just so interesting and fun to be around.

Were. Past tense.

I thought something was finally going to change. I thought I could feel myself slowly rising up from rock bottom. But I guess I was just imagining things.

In the end, it was all just make-believe.



—Day 9 & 10 According To Yaegashi Taichi—

The day after Gotou gave them that ultimatum, Yaegashi Taichi went with his friend Watase Shingo to visit the soccer team.

This greatly confused the older students—“I thought the recruitment period was over now... and we’re not allowed to switch clubs for another couple weeks, right?”—but after a brief explanation, they laughed and said “Sure, why not?” In fact, they even let him participate in a practice game with them.

That night, at dinner, Taichi told his family all about it.

His mother said, “You should take this opportunity to go back to baseball! But if soccer’s what you really want to do, then I won’t stop you.”

His sister said, “Do it! Soccer’s *sooo* much cooler than baseball nowadays! You’ll be so popular!” (She was really into soccer these days; she’d been gushing about the “hotties” on her favorite team as well as the insane salaries of those players drafted overseas.)

He hadn’t seen Kiriyama or Aoki all day. And when he spotted Nagase and Inaba in class, he greeted them with a “hey” and left it at that.

The next day was the day of the deadline. They had until the end of the day to figure out a club activity, or else the Cultural Research Club was as good as dead.

Taichi hadn’t really spoken to any of them since the last time they met up in the clubroom. Why would he? They weren’t friends with each other prior to the creation of the Cultural Research Club. They were just fellow first-years. And no one was actively trying to save the club, so it was looking like they’d soon be right back where they started.

They’d only spent a tiny bit of time together... and once they were disbanded, they’d all likely end up assigned to entirely different clubs. They’d still see each other in class and in the halls, of course, but... never again would their lives all intersect in quite the same way.

All day long, Taichi found himself preoccupied with his own thoughts.

Like Inaba said, none of them had any attachment to the club. They hadn’t spent enough time with each other to bond, nor was

there any special event that brought them together as a unified group. For that matter, they didn't even have anything in common to begin with.

Granted, they were all good people—interesting people. Taichi wasn't opposed to hanging out with them again sometime. But that was the extent of his interest. He had no burning desire to see the club die, but then again, he wasn't campaigning to keep it alive, either.

Then, before he knew it, school had ended for the day.

“Yaegashi! You're sitting in with us again, right? Man, you should just try out for the team already,” called Watase.

“Haha... Yeah...” Taichi replied halfheartedly as he rose from his desk.

For a moment, he gazed at Nagase and Inaba, sitting with their backs facing him, their desks both positioned ahead of his.

Then he turned and left the classroom with Watase.

They arrived at the locker room situated in one corner of the athletic field and changed into their uniforms with the rest of the other first-years. No older students—they were assigned a different location.

At Yamaboshi High School, soccer practice was fairly rigorous, but there was no strict hierarchy between the older and younger students, so the team felt like one big, happy family. There were a lot of fellow first-years, too, so Taichi could see himself easily making some new friends.

All in all, it was a respectable choice from any angle. His family was sure to approve. Plus, unlike with the Cultural Research Club, he wouldn't have to awkwardly try to explain himself whenever someone asked him about his after-school activities. Besides, it would be good exercise—and as a small added bonus, being on the soccer team generally boosted one's popularity with the opposite sex as well.

Above all, however, he would only get one chance at high school, and if he wanted to make the most of it, he was better off on a sports team. It was time to put the Cultural Research Club behind him and—

Just then, Taichi felt his cell phone buzz in his pocket. His heart skipped a beat. Was someone trying to get in touch with him? *No, it can't be them*, he thought to himself. After all, they hadn't traded

phone numbers or email addresses. They hadn't gotten that far.

Wait... Who did I think was trying to contact me? Who was I hoping it was? Maybe I—

Meanwhile, his phone kept buzzing. It had to be a phone call. Which meant he needed to answer it.

He took out his phone and flipped it open. As it turned out, it actually wasn't a phone call at all—it was an alarm he'd set in his calendar app. Onscreen, the notif read:

Deadline: Cultural Research Club

He didn't remember setting this alarm, but he must have done it at some point after Gotou gave them the ultimatum. Clearly his past self had wanted to remind his future self—but why? Had he simply set the alarm out of obligation? Or...

Joining a proper club was the right choice—the *correct* choice. The sensible choice. The logical choice. The reasonable choice. The appropriate choice. The analytical choice. The obvious choice. The coherent choice. The rational choice. The wise choice. The responsible choice. The natural choice. The best choice.

Yes, it was correct in every sense.

So why did it feel like his heart was being torn in two?

The Cultural Research Club was going to disappear just ten days after it was created. That knowledge weighed on him, threatening to make his knees buckle.

He'd only spent ten days in that club, excluding weekends, and only a couple of hours per day at most. It was, comparatively speaking, a tiny fraction of time, and they hadn't spent it doing anything of importance—just chatting. So why in the world did it feel like he was losing something so special—so precious—so irreplaceable? He just didn't understand. He couldn't begin to put it into words.

But in the end...

"Uh, Yaegashi? What's wrong? Hurry up and get changed, man!"

...he knew what his heart wanted.

"Sorry, Watase... There's something I gotta take care of."

He wanted to see it through to the bitter end, no matter the cost.

"What?"

"I'm really sorry... I promise, I'll explain everything later!"

He'd found a reason to care, and now he wanted to make a

stand. To protect the club.

“Hey! Wait a minute—!”

But Taichi wasn’t going to wait any longer. As he said, he planned to explain it all later; for now, he sped out of the locker room.

Each step rustled the grass underfoot. Steadily, the rhythm grew faster and faster. He was following his heart—and this time he wasn’t going to take any detours.

By the time he arrived at the Rec Hall building, he was almost at a run. A thousand questions raced through his mind: *Is there still time? Is it too late? Should I have told someone? What if no one’s up there? What can I possibly hope to accomplish at this stage?*

But his feet kept moving, carrying him *up, up, up*, one stair at a time.

Think about it logically. Use common sense. What merit is there? What significance is there?

But although these chains tried to snake around him and weigh him down, they broke apart at the slightest resistance. In the end, they were no obstacle in the face of determination.

He reached the landing, then headed up the next set of stairs, two steps at a time. Then, at last, he arrived at the top—the fourth floor.

He headed down the hallway, to the room on the right. Room 401.

He opened the door.

“To think you of all people would be the last one to show up.”

It was Inaba Himeko. And she wasn’t alone.

There, sitting beside her, was Nagase Iori. And Kiriya Yui. And Aoki Yoshifumi. All of them present and accounted for.

Aoki leapt to his feet. “Dude, I’m tellin’ ya, this is wild!” he exclaimed.

“Hahaha... We never agreed to meet up today, but... here we are, huh?” Kiriya murmured beside him, her eyes wide in astonishment.

On her other side sat Nagase. Her smile seemed fragile—pained—but most of all, relieved. And it was so beautiful, it took Taichi’s breath away.

“What are you guys doing here, anyway?” He’d been expecting maybe *one* other person at the most. Certainly not all of them.

“Same reason as you, I imagine.”

“Actually, Inaba, you’re the biggest mystery of all. After everything you said the other day, why would you come back?”

She faltered, then grimaced and turned away shyly.

“Taichi! I keep telling you, you can’t just ask these questions flat-out! Have some tact!” Nagase scolded him dismally.

“Oh... Sorry...”

“I just... you know. In the end, I... you know...” Inaba scratched the back of her head, her gaze darting nervously to and fro.

“You don’t owe him an answer, Inaban,” Nagase reassured her.

For a moment, Inaba seemed to give up on finishing her statement, but then she shook her head and resigned herself to saying it out loud:

“I just... felt like it.”

Taichi burst out laughing.

“Hey! Don’t laugh!”

“No, no! I’m not laughing at you! I just... I couldn’t agree more.”

If he’d made the decision through a rational list of pros and cons, the Cultural Research Club wouldn’t have stood a chance. And while it was generally important to try to consider things rationally... sometimes the “right” choice was the one your heart wanted instead. In other words: sometimes you *just felt like it* . And that was the only reason you needed.

It didn’t matter what their club activity was—none of that was important. Taichi just felt like being with them. And that was the telltale sign that he’d forged real bonds here. Could true friends be chosen purely through *rational analysis* ? He wagered the answer was no. If you took the time to weigh the pros and cons of the friendship, then it wasn’t a friendship at all.

He knew this from experience, too. In elementary and middle school, there was no real rhyme or reason to the way he made friends—it just *felt* right. That’s what it always came back to. There was never any big, dramatic event that brought them together; it just sort of *happened* .

But that gut feeling was not to be underestimated. Those bonds could never be broken; they were stronger than logic and reasoning. As it turned out, the heart could bring anyone together, even people with nothing in common. In the end, that gut feeling was of critical importance—

But on that note, Taichi realized something important: he’d assumed they all implicitly understood this, but he hadn’t actually

asked them.

“Just checking, but... are you guys fully committed to keeping this club alive, or do we still need to discuss—”

“C’mon, man,” Aoki cut in. Donning a “cool guy” persona, he ran a hand through his hair. “It’s kinda lame to ask, don’tcha think?”

Yes, Taichi was inclined to agree. But still...

“...Man, I hate it when you’re right about something.”

“Wh... How come?! Why do you hate me, Taichi?!”

“Anyways ...”

“Yui?! This is kind of important for me!”

“Oh, shut up, will you? As I was saying, we kinda need to figure something out, right? Isn’t the deadline today?”

“Oh, right! I guess that is more important than me!”

“Yeah... We need to come up with a solid plan,” Nagase murmured, her expression hard.

“Hmmm...” everyone murmured in unison.

Looking back, they’d spent a solid week trying to come up with something... to no avail.

“Actually... about that...” Inaba began hesitantly.

“What’s up, Inaban?” asked Nagase.

“You see, I, um... I mean, not that I put too much thought into it—I just randomly thought of something, is the thing. Seriously, it’s not like it was keeping me up at night.”

“Spit it out already,” Taichi muttered under his breath.

“Don’t rush me, jackass! Basically, I’ve... you know... got a suggestion for our club activity.”

“For real?! That was fast! You rock, Inaban!”

“You really wanted to save the club, didn’t y—ouch!”

Inaba smacked him over the head. Never before had a girl outright smacked him like that.

“Keep your comments to yourself, Taichi! And for the record, you’re wrong, okay?!”

“Awww, Inaban’s embarrassed! So cute!” Nagase squealed. Blushing, Inaba clenched her jaw.

“So, what’s your idea, Inaba?” asked Kiriyaama.

“Put simply, we’ll create a school newspaper and publish it. The Newspaper Club is already doing this, so we know for a fact we’ll get approved. Plus, that way we can each write articles about our own personal interests. See? It’s a win-win for everybody.”

“Wha...?! That’s *perfect* , Inabacchan!” Aoki shouted.

Nagase clapped her hands together. “I get it! We’ll put a bunch of random stuff together and call it the Cultural Research Club Culture Bulletin! Remember our club objective? ‘A broader scope of research unfettered by existing frameworks.’ It fits!” Then she paused, frowning slightly. “You know, ‘Cultural Research Club’ is a real mouthful. Is there any way we can shorten it a bit?”

“Yeah, we should have some kind of nickname,” Kiriyaama agreed.

“Hmmm... Cult-Club...? Cu-Re...?” Suddenly, Nagase looked up, her eyes shining, her ponytail bouncing with her movements. “How about an acronym? The CRC!”

The Cultural Research Club, AKA the CRC. Their club activity: publishing the *Culture Bulletin* .

“The CRC... That’s pretty catchy,” Inaba mused.

“You’ve got a real knack for naming stuff, huh, Iori-chan?” Aoki remarked.

“CRC... Sounds kinda cute!” Kiriyaama exclaimed.

“I like it,” Taichi chimed in.

Starting today, the five of them were officially the CRC.

“Alright, guys! Now we just need to go see Gossan!” Kiriyaama leapt to her feet, her folding chair clattering behind her.

But Inaba remained seated, her posture perfectly straight. “We’ll need to decide on a president and vice president, right? We’re going to have to put *someone’s* name on the form, at least.”

Taichi seemed to recall Gotou mentioning something along those lines. “How should we decide? Do we let people volunteer, or put it to a vote?”

“I think we should let people volunteer!” Aoki shouted, his hand raised. “But for the record, *I’m* not volunteering for jack!”

“No, no, no. We should do this fair and square,” said Nagase, wagging her finger disapprovingly. “Let’s play rock-paper-scissors.”

“In what way is that ‘fair’?! Rock-paper-scissors is all about luck! It’s *random!* ” Inaba retorted.

“Oh, relax! It’s *fine* ! Okay, here we go! Rock, paper, scissors!”

Everyone hastily extended their hands to join the game.

“Wait, so... do the titles go to whoever *wins* or whoever *loses* ...?”

“Oh, right, we didn’t decide that... Okay, start over!”

“You just want to start over because you lost, don’tcha?”

“Guilty as charged...”

“Alright, Iori, you’re club president.”

“Welcome to the club, Prez!”

And so the Yamaboshi High School Cultural Research Club was officially approved.



A
TALE
OF
TWO
LONERS



A Tale of Two Loners

“What a nice, sunny day... Really makes me want to kick back and relax! Especially since I’ve been going to the dojo, like, nonstop.”

“I know the feeling, Yui-senpai.”

Kiriyama Yui and Enjouji Shino sat at the table, staring lethargically into space. It was just another peaceful day in Rec Hall Room 401.

Inaba Himeko had anticipated that they would all get sick of each other, what with having to cram seven people in one tiny clubroom, but in the end, she got used to it pretty quickly. Not like all seven of them attended club every single day, after all. Perhaps seven was actually the ideal member count for a room of this size.

Nearly a month had passed since the Cultural Research Club had gained its newest members. But although their ranks had increased, their activities didn’t change in the slightest. In the CRC, each person was expected to entertain themselves.

Across the table, Yaegashi Taichi was working on his homework. Joining him was *Nagase Iori* of all people.

“Man, this assignment sucks... Too bad it doesn’t stand a chance against my mighty brain! Oh yeah! I’m solving the crap out of these problems!”

She seemed to be having a great time. *Here’s hoping you don’t burn out halfway through.*

Inaba shifted her gaze to the side, where Aoki Yoshifumi sat staring at his shogi pieces. “Nnnngghh... What do I do with this guy...?”

Across from him sat Uwa Chihiro. “Checkmate,” he replied without looking up from his magazine. Even with his opponent almost entirely distracted, Aoki *still* couldn’t win.

“Nooo! Not yet! There’s gotta be a way for me to make a comeback! Let’s start over!”

“So in other words, you admit defeat.”

Chihiro’s response was stone cold, but something about it brought a smile to Inaba’s face.

Sometimes she worried that they’d gotten a little *too* lazy, but in

the end, she always concluded that they were fine as they were. Admittedly, there *was* a point in time at which they tried to act like a properly structured club in order to impress the first-years, but that quickly fell apart. They didn't even last a month before their rigid schedule turned into "Eh, just find something to do on your own."

Now, here at the end of May, the CRC had firmly cemented itself as "the club where you do whatever you want." There was the monthly *Culture Bulletin* they had to publish, of course, but the manuscript wasn't due until the start of June, so they still had plenty of time to work on it.

"Aaaagghh! FORGET IT! I'll just do this stupid homework later! Let's play a game or something!"

Sure enough, Iori had burnt out, just as Inaba predicted. Evidently, the homework had started to stress her out.

"You too, Taichi! C'mon!" She shook him by the shoulder to get his attention.

"In a minute, okay? I'm almost done."

"I'm in!" Aoki shouted eagerly. "So, what are we doing?!"

"Uh, Aoki-san? Can you at least admit that you lost before you move on to something else?"

"N-No! I refuse to let *you* of all people beat me! And for the record, since this game ended prematurely, it doesn't count! Heh heh heh!"

"I just want to take it easy for today... And another thing? Don't be such a sore loser, Aoki. Right, Shino-chan?"

"That's right! Aoki-senpai, you're pathetic! Let's have some drinks and snacks!"

"Yui?! Shino-chan?! Can you guys bond over something that *isn't* dunking on me?!"

"Alrighty then, drinks and snacks it is! Let's have some kinda group talk!" Iori declared as she rose from her seat to fetch the snacks from the shelf.

"But we talk to each other all the time..."

"Don't ruin it, Taichi! Anyway, I'm gonna go buy us some drinks. Expense it to the club funds, will you, Inaban?"

"Fine, fine. But get a two-liter! And make sure it's a knockoff brand!"

And so Iori bolted out of the clubroom.

"You're going to be a good wife someday," Taichi commented

under his breath. Then his eyes widened when he realized what he'd said.

"A good wife...?! W-Well, duh, silly! Hee hee hee..."

Holy shit, I could die happy! And if it slipped out on accident, then that means he really meant it! Record... play... repeat!

As Inaba reveled in her glee, Yui piped up. "Wait, but... I mean, we say we're going to have a group talk, but like, what if none of us can come up with a topic? Actually, that reminds me. How's school going for our first-years? Have you made any good friends?"

"Looks like you found a topic just fine," Taichi muttered. As usual, he never missed a beat when it came to snarky one-liners.

"How's school going...?" Shino repeated. "Well... I *did* make some friends, but I wouldn't say I'm close with any of them... At least, I don't think so."

"Ditto."

"Eh, we're still pretty early into the school year," Aoki remarked. "Although I seem to recall Inabacchan and Iori-chan being total besties right around this time last year." He glanced in Inaba's direction.

"Me and Iori? You and Yui were the exact same way."

"Yeah, I totally wish that was true, but eh, not so much. You and Iori had a connection that was *way* deeper."

"Deeper, huh?" As usual, Aoki had a weirdly sharp sense of intuition.

"Yeah... Not to mention you would always put up these walls between us back then," Yui added.

Indeed, Inaba was once a very guarded person.

"That reminds me," Taichi murmured, "didn't you say there was a story behind how you and Nagase got so close? And then you never told us about it?"

"What?! Oh em gee, you *have* to tell us! Right, Shino-chan?!"

"Y-Yes please!"

Just like that, the lazy mood in the room went flying out the window.

"Alright, settle down..." *Not that I really wanted to spread it around, but fine.* "I guess I don't mind telling everyone, since Taichi wants to know so badly."

"Huh? Me?"

Don't you? It sounded an awful lot like you did...

"I'm starting to think Inaba has selective hearing or something..."

Well, whatever. Just tell us already!”

“Alright.” *I guess it couldn’t hurt.*

It was exactly one year ago to the day, so this was a good opportunity to reflect on how far they’d come. Besides, not like it would reveal anything personal—as long as she was careful, that is. After all, some things were best kept between the two of them...

+ + +

One month into our first year of high school, the early shyness had worn off, and everyone had grown comfortable with their classmates. By this point, cliques had formed based on common ground—people who sat near each other, people who attended the same middle school, and so on. *Almost like our own little ecosystem*, I thought to myself.

What position would I take in the food chain? This was a critical question to any teenager—one that would affect our entire high school career. School was, in essence, a microcosm of society, and one’s relative success was predicated entirely on the relationships formed therein.

As for me, I’d chosen to associate myself with a laid-back, relatively low-maintenance clique, one that (for the most part) lacked the drama and cat-fights common within other all-girl groups. Granted, in my experience, the quiet girls were often surprisingly vain and jealous at times, but fortunately these girls didn’t seem like the type.

That said, I was by no means *committed* to this clique. I didn’t hang out with them after school or anything, and I still frequently interacted with people from other groups. To me, this clique was something of a home base, where people respected me for always speaking my mind without crossing the line into offensive territory. This was precisely the reputation I was angling for.

“Earth to Inaba-san! What’s wrong?” one of the girls asked as they ate lunch.

“Huh? Oh, sorry. Just got lost in thought, that’s all.” I took a bite of my half-eaten sandwich. It generally wasn’t polite to stare into space in the presence of four other people.

“She does that a lot. She’s always thinking about something.”

“I know, right? She’s so cool!”

“If that’s all it takes to impress people, then I must’ve lucked

out,” I joked.

The other girls laughed—but not very hard.

Admittedly, I owed my social success in large part to this particular group, since they always welcomed me back to the flock no matter how far I strayed. For that, I was grateful.

So far, so good. At the rate I was headed, I had this whole “high school” thing in the bag. All it took was a carefully manicured, respectable outward image, and as long as I didn’t go too far out of bounds, I could coast along on the momentum for the next three years...

“That reminds me, Inaba-san. How’s it going in the... Cultural Search Club?”

“Cultural *Research* Club, thank you. And to answer your question... eh, it’s pretty much the same as usual. We’re all just screwing around.”

The one anomaly in my otherwise flawless high school career: the CRC. Never in my wildest dreams did I imagine I’d end up in such a pointless club, and yet here I was. There was no justifiable reason for me to want to spend time in that clubroom, and yet I did.

“Can’t wait to read next month’s *Culture Bulletin* .”

“Thanks. It’s kind of a clusterfuck, but we work hard on it.”

Too hard, in my opinion, for something that ultimately mattered so little. But at this point, that wasn’t important anymore. As it turned out, I enjoyed being around a bunch of free spirits who weren’t so caught up in all the minutiae of day-to-day life. My club members were good, honest people... with one exception.

My gaze shifted to the center of the classroom, where Nagase Iori was eating lunch with another group of girls.

Iori was the biggest enigma I had ever encountered. It didn’t make *sense* . On the outside, she seemed so down-to-earth and straightforward—just a bubbly teenage girl like any other. And yet...

As I watched, Iori made some inaudible joke, and her whole group burst out laughing.

“Look, she’s zoning out again! Oh, were you looking at Iori-chan? She’s in your club, right?”

“Oh, uh... yeah,” I replied vaguely.

The other girls leaned in curiously.

“Lucky! I wish *I* could be friends with her, too. She’s so pretty!”

“Friends...?”

“Aren’t you? I mean, you’re in the same club, and I’ve seen you talk during class...”

“Yeah, but... I think it’s a little early to say we’re friends.”

“Oh my *god* , you’re such an ice queen!”

“Totally!” the other girls chimed in.

Fortunately, no one dared to rock the boat by asking if I felt the same way about *them* , too... but I could tell they were questioning it internally. Silence fell between us. *Shit* .

Desperate to smooth over my social faux pas, I reached for a change of subject. “So, what’s new with—”

But just then, I felt someone’s eyes on me. I turned my head... and found Nagase Iori staring at me with cold, lifeless eyes.

What does it mean to be friends?

Speaking in the most superficial sense, yes, I had a few—but they weren’t *real* friends. At least, not by my personal metric.

—*You’re such an ice queen.*

No, I really wasn’t. I was just afraid to let anyone in. And this was the reason why I found myself incapable of making any actual connections.

Someday I was going to have to find a life partner and get married, and yet here I was, unable to form even the most basic of human relationships. Thanks to that, I couldn’t even *begin* to contemplate romance at this stage.

Seriously, try to imagine me falling head over heels for someone at any point over the next three years. What a joke.

“Inaban! Let’s go to the clubroom!” Iori called, after the final bell rang.

With her large, bright eyes, well-defined nose, silky hair, and porcelain skin, it was easy to see how she’d stolen the spotlight. Unlike these other girls, however, I didn’t particularly aspire to be like her.

“Club time for both of us, eh, Iori? Well, hop to it! I’ll be rooting for you from the calligraphy clubroom!” shouted a particularly energetic Nakayama Mariko, her pigtails bouncing.

“Fight the good fight for me!”

“Likewise, comrade!”

Then they exchanged a firm handshake for some reason that was lost on me. The two of them were birds of a feather, always joking around with each other.

“Okay! Let’s go, Inaban!” With a final wave to Nakayama, Iori led me out of the classroom.

As we headed to the Rec Hall, the only sound was that of our footsteps.

...*Wait, what?* The conversation died so suddenly, it felt like we’d stepped into the vacuum of space. Not that I expected Iori to talk constantly, of course, but still... She’d been in high spirits leaving the classroom, so it struck me as odd that she’d suddenly fall quiet. Was it because we were alone together?

Come to think of it, Iori was only ever energetic when other people were present. When it was just the two of us, she calmed down considerably... probably because I wasn’t the high-energy type... or maybe Iori just didn’t find me especially fun to hang out with.

“Sorry if I’m boring you, Iori,” I told her without hesitation. I preferred to put these things on the table so both parties could work toward a solution. Only an idiot would keep it bottled up.

“Huh? Why are you apologizing? I don’t understand.”

“Well, you always clam up whenever it’s just the two of us.”

“Oh, right. Well, I mean, you like it better this way, don’t you? Wait... Am I wrong?”

“No, you’re not wrong, but...”

“Whew! That’s a relief! You know, I don’t mind having some quiet time every now and then!”

She skipped forward in a giddy display. Meanwhile, I watched her suspiciously. This wasn’t the response I had expected, and it gave me pause.

Objectively speaking, Iori hadn’t done anything wrong; she had simply explained that she kept herself quiet because she believed I preferred it to the alternative. But for some reason, this put me on guard. Almost like there was something far more frightening lurking beneath.

Arriving at the Rec Hall, we headed up the exhausting three full flights of stairs to the fourth floor.

“Man, it sucks having to walk up all these stairs, huh?” Iori remarked, and yet she wasn’t even out of breath. *Do you mean “it sucks for you,” or what?*

As we reached the fourth floor, I decided to be blunt.

“Look... You don’t have to change your personality to match me. I don’t need you to—”

Iori whirled around, her expression frozen in fear... or so I thought, but a split-second later, she was wearing her usual smile.

“What are you talking about?” she asked brightly as we entered the clubroom.

Inexplicably, a chill ran down my spine. That was the moment I became convinced that there was more to Nagase Iori than any of us knew.

Instantly, I was gripped by an intense feeling of revulsion. Why? I wasn’t sure.

All I knew was that Iori was undeniably doing it on purpose.

From then on, I started to scrutinize Iori more carefully.

She always seemed like she was having fun whenever she was talking to other people, but whenever no one was looking (or, more accurately, whenever I was the only one looking), she’d get this cold, steely look on her face. And whenever I saw it, I was overcome with emotions I couldn’t explain—fear, but also irritation.

It made me sick to my stomach. Why the hell was I freaking out over this one person?

As I was walking through the classroom, our eyes met, and she called out to me. “Sup, Inaban!”

This was the “energetic” Iori everyone was familiar with.

“Hey there. So tell me, is this ‘carefree goofball’ schtick just a cover for your desperate need to fit in?” I asked, hoping to test my hypothesis.

“I mean... it’s more fun to play along, isn’t it?” she responded with a flawless smile. This didn’t answer my question, but whatever.

“I suppose so.” I headed past her in the direction of my desk.

I was the kind of person who loved to collect intel, often by unscrupulous means, because having that knowledge made me feel secure. Generally speaking, however, I knew where to draw the line. Was it time for me to back off?

“Now that I think about it...”

At her voice, I stopped short and turned back—

“...you act like you’ve got nothing to hide, but in reality, you’re not all that different from me, are you?”

—You’re not all that different from me, are you?

I bit my thumbnail in frustration, with Iori’s voice echoing in my mind. She made it sound like she could see right through me,

and that pissed me off. *Don't even TRY to psychoanalyze me, bitch. I've already got you all figured out.*

Meanwhile, Iori continued to act like her usual bubbly self in the classroom. Classes were over for the day, and she was engaged in conversation with Fujishima Maiko.

"Sorry, but I'll have to pass."

"Aww, c'mon, Fujishima-san! You're no fun!"

"I'm the class president, you know."

"Boooo! Time for my revenge! Take this!"

"S-Stop that, Nagase-san. If you keep touching my body, I'm afraid you might awaken something you'll regret."

By all appearances, Iori's playful affection seemed genuine... but this only served to bolster my suspicion that she was, in fact, a wolf in sheep's clothing. I grabbed my bookbag and left the classroom without saying a word.

When I arrived at the clubroom, I found that I was the first one there. So I sat down, took out my laptop, and powered it up. I knew if I wanted to spend time on my computer, I could always go do this at home... and yet I *wanted* to be here.

For some reason, the empty clubroom made me feel all sentimental and shit.

Of course, I didn't *actually* believe that these people had accepted me as one of their own. I was too different; I could never truly fit in. And yet, at the same time, being with them felt surprisingly natural. It made me think that maybe I was wrong about them... but of course, I knew better. The *real* question was: how long would I last?

While I chewed on that thought, the knob turned, and the door swung open.

"Hey guys! Oh... Just you, huh, Inaban?"

"Sorry to disappoint."

"Huh? I'm not disappointed! Oh, but... I *did* get a little upset when I noticed you left without me. Especially since Taichi had to stay behind for cleaning duty. You should've said something!"

"Didn't want to bother you." I hadn't completely switched out of introspection mode, and my tone was a bit more gruff than I'd intended.

"Aw, you're just shy, aren'tcha, Inaban?"

"Seriously, quit trying to force it." You don't have to pretend you enjoy spending time with me.

“Huh?” Her face froze as her eyes widened in surprise. Two seconds ticked by... and then her smile returned. “Well, okay. If you’re not in the mood, I’ll just have to leave you be. Hahaha.”

She walked over to the little black couch and plopped down onto it. Then she tucked her knees up to her chest and buried her face in her arms.

“Wh... Hey...” I muttered weakly. Then I looked away. Why was she throwing a tantrum at me? I clucked my tongue in frustration and started typing away furiously.

I must’ve crossed the line with her. Come on, I’m better than this. Don’t stick your nose in her business—just leave her be. Don’t make it weird.

This is how I’d lived my life. I desperately avoided hurting anyone—to say nothing of letting anyone hurt me—and in exchange, I threw away the chance to make real connections. It was the safest path for a piece of shit like me, and I had no intention of straying from it.

The next day, Yui and Taichi both had plans with other friends, so they couldn’t make it to the clubroom. Since attendance was by no means mandatory, on days where there were multiple absences, we sometimes decided to cancel club for the day and head home early.

After school, I stopped by the library to do some research, then headed off campus. Most people left school either immediately after class or after club activities let out, so I was in the extreme minority. Outside, the athletic field was swarming with students playing sports for their respective teams.

Just up ahead, I spotted Nagase Iori. She was bent forward, peering through the hedges at the street outside. *The fuck is she doing?* I stopped short. Then I caught myself and started walking again. *Just ignore it. It’s none of my business.*

But evidently Iori had already sensed my presence, because she turned and looked at me. After a beat... she stuck her head through the hedges again, like she’d chosen to ignore me entirely.

This *really* pissed me off. *I* wanted to be the one to ignore *her*, but now she’d beaten me at my own game. And I wasn’t going to take it lying down.

“Hey, Iori? What the hell are you doing?”

She slowly turned back.

“...Oh. Hi, Inaban.”

Don't play dumb with me. “What. Are. You. Doing?”

“Oh, uh... nothing much...”

“Liar. You're obviously up to something.”

“Well, yeah, but...”

She completely lacked her usual energy, which was a first in my experience with her. Why was she always so quiet whenever I was around? Or was this her default? I couldn't tell, but either way, it left a sour taste in my mouth.

“Out with it already. You're wasting my time.”

“But... if I tell you, I feel like it's just going to waste even *more* of your time.”

“Which means you *are* willing to tell me, right? Well, I can't just abandon you now. What kind of...”

...friend would I be?

But I couldn't finish the sentence, because I realized we weren't actually friends at all. Silently, I cursed myself for nearly implying otherwise. To do so would be selfish and dishonest, and I held myself to higher standards than that.

But Iori must've realized what I was going to say. She looked a bit taken aback.

“O-Okay then, uh... I guess I'll tell you. This will probably sound really weird, so feel free to laugh it off as a joke... I'm not even 100% sure I'm right, but...”

Everything about this screamed *mind your own business*, but now it was too late.

“I think maybe... someone's stalking me.”

Great. A stalker. That's WAY more serious than I'm equipped to deal with.

I must've let these thoughts show on my face, because Iori hastily piped up to continue.

“But I might just be paranoid, y'know? It's just... Every now and then, I feel like I'm being followed, or being watched... but it might be all in my head, who knows!”

Her desperate denial made it all the more obvious that she wasn't joking around.

“You need to tell the cops about this. Well... Then again, they might not do anything without proof of a crime...”

“Yeah, and like I said... I could be wrong about this.” She seemed weirdly timid. Was the fear impacting her decision-making

faculties?

"In that case, make sure you walk home with a friend from now on. They probably won't make a move with a witness present."

"R-Right, but... I don't know who to ask..."

"Ha ha, very funny. You've got about a million friends, Iori. Go ask one of them."

"But..." Iori hesitated, her gaze flitting to and fro. Every now and then she snuck a glance at me like she was gauging something.

What's your problem? I stared back at her. And when our eyes met, it almost felt like a spark of electricity jolted through my entire body. My pulse quickened. *What was THAT?*

"I don't... really have any friends, actually."

"Excuse me?" She had to be goddamn delusional. "What are you talking about? You're on good terms with practically our entire class, are you not?"

"Yeah, but... those aren't *real* friends. I don't hang out with any of them after school."

Which means they don't count, is that it? Oh, poor baby. Pardon me while I play you the world's smallest violin. Compared to an *actual* friendless loser like me, she had no right to complain.

"In that case, why don't you go use your *magical social chameleon powers* to talk someone into it?"

"It's not something I can control," she muttered in an icy voice, her expression blank. She could have simply ignored my overblown sarcasm, but instead she took it 100% seriously, almost as if to acknowledge that I was indeed correct.

You're kidding me... right?

A split-second later, she realized what she'd said.

"J-Just kidding! Haha!"

Stop it already. Stop trying to force a smile. You think I can't see right through that shit? You think I'm that stupid?

My anger built and built... but I held myself back. Iori had to be scared shitless about this stalker thing. Only a massive asshole would kick her while she was down.

"...Okay then, I'll walk you home myself. We live in the same direction anyway, right? I can get you most of the way there, at least." Normally I would *never* get this involved, but this time my hands were tied.

"No, no, no. I can't ask you to do that."

"I don't need you to. I'm gonna do it because I'm nice like that."

Besides, if something happened to you, I'd blame myself for the rest of my life. Now let's get going." And with that, I started walking.

After a moment of hesitation, Iori followed after me.

"Um... Thank you," she whispered somewhere behind me. I squirmed uncomfortably.

Today, for the first time, it felt like I'd only just now met the real Iori. We walked in silence, maintaining a careful distance. As for me, I had finally figured out the source of my irritation.

Deep down, Nagase Iori and Inaba Himeko were two sides of the same coin. Looking at her felt like looking in a mirror, and I hated it.

On the way home that day, sure enough, I got the vague sense that we were being watched.



That morning, I was on my way to school. The weather was hot, and paired with the fresh green leaves on the roadside trees, it was an exemplary midsummer's day. In the middle of goddamn May, no less.

Iori tried countless times to talk me out of walking her home yesterday, but in the end, I accompanied her (almost) all the way to her house. Sure, it took a lot of time, but I refused to risk the possibility that something might happen to her if I wasn't there.

That said, it felt like I'd glimpsed a different side of her. Never before had I seen her so fragile... so *vulnerable*. How many people on this earth could claim to know the real Nagase Iori? Even *I* hadn't seen this coming, and I generally considered myself an excellent judge of character.

"I'm sorry, but I can't!" a familiar voice cried out, panicked.

I stopped short and scanned the area for the source. There, on the sidewalk, was Nagase Iori in the flesh. A man in his twenties stood in front of her, blocking her path.

"Come on, just hear me out. That's all I ask."

He was wearing a clean pressed suit and didn't particularly strike me as a creep, but still... *He's not out hitting on girls first thing in the morning, is he?*

"Please—my boss has been breathing down my neck about this. The guy's obsessed with you. He's convinced you've got what it takes!"

“I get that, but I really need to get to school, so... I need you to... let me go.”

“Trust me, I don’t *want* to bother you like this! But you keep ignoring me, so I don’t have much choice!”

Frightened, Iori shrank back.

“Hear me out, just this once! I promise, you won’t be rushed into signing a contract or anything. I gave you my business card, remember? Our talent agency is 100% legit.”

Apparently this guy was a talent scout. I’d heard of actresses and models being hired off the street, but I didn’t realize the people who scouted them were so... *aggressive* . Either way, bottom line, Iori was clearly not comfortable with this.

Other students gaped at the spectacle as they passed on their way to school—but none of them dared to step in and get her out of there. And when Iori noticed everyone staring, she started to shrink down even more.

But it was *her* behavior, not the onlookers’, that pissed me off the most. *What’s the matter with you? You need to be firm with him and say no! In ten minutes you’ll be laughing about it with the rest of us back in the classroom. I know you can do this, Nagase Iori! Come on!*

Truth be told, it surprised me that I put this much stock into her. But, contrary to my hopes, Iori just stared at the ground and trembled.

“I guess... it can’t hurt to talk about it...”

What are you saying, you moron?!

I dashed over to her, slid in between them, and grabbed Iori by the arm. “Sorry, but we’re really in a hurry.” And without even looking at the talent scout, I dragged her away as fast as my legs could carry me.

“Huh—wha—?” Confused, Iori stumbled along after me.

“Hey!” the man called after us.

I should’ve ignored him, but instead I turned back on reflex.

“You’re pretty cute yourself,” he continued with a suggestive grin.

Two days in a row, I had witnessed Iori’s fragile side. Sure, maybe she was just going through a lot right now, but at the same time, it was just so drastically different from the Iori I thought I knew.

Now I had inadvertently come to her rescue. *Twice* . This was all

well and good... except now I couldn't possibly turn a blind eye to her plight. I didn't care about the stalker or the talent scout or whatever—I cared about *her* .

This was a mystery I couldn't begin to solve, and it was driving me insane. Thus, I started to investigate... starting with the girls in our class who had attended middle school with her.

"You know Nagase Iori? What was she like in middle school?"

"Oh, Iori-chan? Well... She was really popular, I guess? Super nice, pretty, and friendly with basically everyone... Yeah, she was pretty much the same then as she is now."

"Hmm. Do you know of anyone she was close with? A best friend, maybe?"

"At this school?"

"Just in general."

"Let's see... ummm... Huh, that's weird; I can't think of any. Sorry... To be honest, I wasn't super close to her myself. We just talked a lot during class." The girl furrowed her brows. "Man, why can't I think of anyone? Well, whatever. Why do you want to know, anyway? Or do you just like to pretend you're a detective? I feel like this isn't the first time you've interrogated someone."

She laughed, so I laughed along with her.

"Yeah... Once I get curious about something, I start digging until I find the answer. Trust me, it's exhausting being me."

"Oh yeah, that reminds me! Everybody's talking about how you rescued Iori-chan this morning. You guys seem really close!"

"Eh, I just happened to be at the right place at the right time when no one else was."

After that, I spent the rest of the break period wandering down the halls and casually eavesdropping on other people's conversations. This was how I discovered that *our entire grade* was talking about the scandal this morning.

I spoke to a few more people from Iori's middle school, but they all said the same thing.

It was starting to look like Iori sincerely didn't have any good friends. To me this was nigh-unbelievable, considering how cheerful she was at school every day. Why hadn't anyone gotten closer to her? What sort of relationships had she built over the course of her life thus far? Maybe if I found out, I could reference it and—*and what?*

What was I hoping to do with this information?

Delete, delete, delete. I hit the backspace key in my mind until nothing remained.

No, I wasn't going to live like that. I wasn't going to hold out hope, either; it wasn't safe. Instead, I was just going to keep—

"What are you doing, Inaba?"

I looked up to find Kiriya Yui in front of me.

"...Nothing." The clubroom was no place for introspection.

"Aww, come on! I wanna know! And while we're at it, what is it you do on your laptop all day long?"

"Just... making a little macro, that's all."

"What? You mean, like, macaroni?!"

"Forget it. You wouldn't understand."

"Don't talk to me like I'm stupid," she grumbled, pouting her lips.

For a high-schooler, she often acted like a total child... but with her short stature and feisty personality, perhaps it was fitting. Gazing at her, I couldn't help but wonder: were we friends, she and I?

"Hmm? Is there something on my face?"

She combed her long coppery hair out of her face and started feeling her cheeks.

"No, you're good," I reassured her.

"Hey, Iori? Is something wrong with my face?"

"Mmmm... nope! Cute as a button, just like always!"

"Awww, thank you! You're really cute yourself!"

Then Yui and Iori started to fawn over each other.

Looking at Iori right now, you'd never imagine how gloomy she'd been just this morning. If she truly didn't have any real friends, as she'd claimed, then how did she see Yui?

"Dude. Taichi. Read this part." Aoki Yoshifumi held out a manga magazine in Yaegashi Taichi's direction.

"Huh? Uhh... Pfft!"

"Hilarious, am I right?"

"That's some shock humor, alright."

These two were undeniably friends—you could tell just by looking at them. Well... Then again, if this sort of external evaluation was all it took, one could say even *I* had friends. Clearly this wasn't something an outside observer could decide. It was up to each person to make the call on an individual basis.

"Is it just me, or has Inabacchan been kinda quiet lately?" Aoki asked the room.

"Unlike *Yui*, I'm not a chirpy little bird. Sorry to disappoint."

"Hey! Why'd you drag *me* into it?!"

"Felt like it."

"Are you bullying me?!"

"Yep."

"Wha...?! *Iori*! Inaba's being mean!"

At this, my attention naturally turned to Iori, and our eyes met. Truth be told, we hadn't spoken since the incident this morning, and I wasn't sure how to approach her after that.

"There, there, *Yui*. It's okay, I'll protect you... N-Now listen here, Inaban! Just because *Yui*'s a chirpy little bird, it doesn't give you the right to make fun of her!"

"You *agree* with the chirpy part?!"

Everything was just as it always was. That little stutter was probably just in my head.

"I'm not chirpy! I'm not chirpy! *I'm not chirpy*!"

"Are you listenin' to yourself right now...? Don't worry, *Yui*! I'll still like you regardless!"

Now Aoki had joined the fray. While the three of them chattered amongst themselves, Taichi turned to me.

"Is there something on your mind? If there is, I hope you'll talk to me about it. I'm always happy to help."

His "compassion" was so forced and insincere, it made me sick. I couldn't foresee myself ever seeing eye-to-eye with someone like him. Not unless something changed dramatically.

After club activities, we all headed home. Past the gate, we split into two groups: *Yui*, Taichi, and Aoki all lived in the same direction, so they went one way while Iori and I went the other (though we didn't live in the same neighborhood, so eventually the two of us would have to go our separate ways).

Yesterday I'd accompanied her all the way to her house due to the stalker scare, but what about today? She was visibly restless and kept glancing behind us as we walked, so clearly she was still worried about someone following her. On top of that, now she had some talent scout asshole to worry about as well. She was in over her head—I couldn't just sit back and do nothing.

"Hey, so, I'm gonna walk you home again."

“What? But—”

“Remember this morning? I’m not going to let that happen again. If you ‘don’t want to be a burden on me’ or whatever, then hurry up and get your shit together.”

I glanced over at her. In the clubroom she was a beacon of light, but here she was a candle in the breeze.

“Seriously, guys like him? They specifically target girls who seem weak-willed, so you have to stay strong. Tell him you’ll make a scene if he doesn’t leave you alone, or something like that.”

“I... I have trouble saying no to people. I’m used to just... doing what they want.”

“You have the power to stand up for yourself, Iori. I know you’ve got it in you.”

“How do you know that? How are you so sure?”

“Because I can kind of relate... So yeah, I know you can do it,” I finished, hastily changing tack partway through. Otherwise the subject of conversation would shift to me, and I dearly wished to avoid that.

The reason I was always careful not to pry too far was because I didn’t want other people to do the same in return. I didn’t want anyone to see the ugliness I kept hidden inside.

Time for a change of subject.

“Anyway... How are you planning to get to and from school? I can’t walk with you every single day, you know.” *Well, technically I could, but yeah.*

“Ummm... I’ll probably figure something out!” she replied emphatically, but the cheer in her tone was clearly forced.

“Isn’t there anyone else you can ask? I know you said you don’t have any friends, but what about Nakayama or Yui? I mean... don’t they count?”

The word *friends* made my throat tighten.

“Yeah, they count.”

So you DO have friends!

“But they’re just casual friends, not the kind I can open up to about the... y’know... heavy stuff.”

Aha. So that’s how she sees it.

“In other words, you don’t trust them?”

“No! That’s not what I’m saying at all!”

“Yeah, I get it.”

“Huh?”

Long story short, she'd sooner suffer in silence than make them uncomfortable by venting about it. How very noble. But she clearly had her own concept of what it meant to be "friends," and I was in no position to tell her she was wrong.

Passing through the turnstiles, we boarded the train. But when it arrived at my stop, I didn't get off; instead, I debarked at Iori's.

"Inaban... Here."

She handed me some money to pay for the extra distance I'd traveled, and I accepted it without making a fuss.

Her house was a short walk from the station.

"So, just wondering, but is anyone home right now?"

I was starting to worry that she wouldn't be safe there, either. I'd basically gone into full-on Mom Mode at this point—but only because it felt decidedly unsafe to leave her to her own devices.

"No... I don't think she'll be home until late."

"Your mom? Okay, what about your dad? Any siblings?"

"Nope. Right now it's just me and my mom. No siblings anymore."

"Ah." *Sounds complicated.*

Maybe her less-than-idyllic home life was part of the reason she'd turned out this way personality-wise.

In the beginning, I thought she was the perfect girl. Beautiful, sweet, good-natured. But the more I learned about her, the more tragic the story became.

So what was my next move?

Objectively speaking, my best option would be to encourage her to seek help elsewhere while moderately, but not entirely, pulling back on my interactions with her. That said, Iori seemed resistant to the idea of seeking help, so... *Wait, why am I taking HER preferences into consideration here? This is about MY needs... isn't it?*

"Alright then... I'll walk you to and from school for the next few days."

For a moment, I was startled to realize what I'd just said. Was I trying to impress her? Trying to make myself look like a good Samaritan? Did I feel obligated to offer? I asked myself each question in turn, but each time the answer was no.

It wasn't... what I *sincerely wanted* to do, was it? Surely not.

"Inaban... I really, really appreciate the thought, but..."

I could tell she was trying to turn me down, but I could hear the joy concealed in her voice. *God, this is so embarrassing.* My cheeks

were burning. I couldn't even look her in the face.

"L-Look, this is happening, whether you like it or not! I don't need your permission to follow you! Anyway, you should be all set from here!"

I clapped her on the shoulder, then turned and set off briskly in the opposite direction. A beat later, a voice called after me down the street:

"Inaban! Um... Thank you!"

Stop that. You're going to make me smile, damn it.

But as I headed home with that stupid grin on my face... I felt a hungry gaze lingering on me.

And when I turned back, I saw a shadowy figure standing next to the vending machine.

Watching me.

+ + +

"I'm baaaack!"

Nagase Iori returned to the clubroom with a two-liter of black tea purchased from the school store.

"Now let's break open those snacks and get to chatting! Wait... What's going on?"

The other club members were all gathered around Inaba for some reason. Something must've happened while she was out.

"Oh, welcome back, Iori! Inaba's telling us the story of how you two became friends," Yui explained.

Iori looked at Inaba.

"I was just telling them about how we started walking to and from school together. You know, the potential stalker, and the talent scout, and all that."

"Right... Gotcha."

Iori thought back to that period in her life... and with that memory came a whole lot of emotions. She could remember it perfectly, like it was only yesterday.

"Relax, I didn't tell them anything personal about you. Not like I can speak for how you felt back then, obviously. You remember?" she asked, her words suggesting an unspoken "because I sure do."

Iori snickered.

"What're you laughing about?!"

"Just thinking about the way you were back then, compared to

now... The contrast is so hilarious! Pfffft!”

“You’ve changed too, you know!”

“Yeah, I have.” Iori nodded in agreement. *With your help, I took my first steps into real friendship, and now look at me.*

“Uhhh... Are you guys having a moment or something...? And where was I when all this was happening?!” Yui flailed.

“You were busy chirping away, of course.”

“Pfft... Chirpy little bird... Hahahaha!” Inaba burst out laughing. Did she remember? *Huh... That’s surprising.*

“What’s that supposed to mean?! Seriously, what the hecking heck was I doing?!”

“Screaming like you always do, I would imagine,” said Chihiro.

“Good one,” said Taichi.

“I can *hear* you !” Yui shouted back.

“Okay, but can we get back to where we left off?! Did Inabacchan confront the stalker guy herself, or what?! How dark does this story get?!” Aoki yelled excitedly.

Meanwhile, Shino clasped her hands at chest height, gazing into the distance, her eyes sparkling.

“What’s up, Shino-chan?”

“I... I’m so curious about what happened next! I can see it now... Inaba-senpai crafts a bone-chilling, cutthroat plan for revenge... and then Iori-senpai faithfully acts on her orders, curb-stomping the stalker into oblivion... On the battlefield, their friendship blossoms for the first time...”

“Sorry, Shino-chan, but you’re completely off the mark with that one.”

Somehow Shino knew exactly how to walk the line between optimism and pessimism with laser precision.

“Let’s see... Okay, so here’s what I remember.”

And so Iori began to recount her side of the story...

+ + +

It was around this time that I first noticed my acting ability was starting to slip. This was beginning to cause problems in certain aspects of my daily life.

Who am I as a person? What do I want to achieve? I didn’t have the answers, so instead I was just passively coasting through life.

Furthermore, I didn’t have a clue how to interact with the

people around me... so I just defaulted to whatever I thought they wanted. And I had a good time doing it, so clearly there was no harm in it.

I was completely unstable; I didn't know which version of me was actually "me." But after last spring, I had come to terms with that... and now I was just trying to make it work.

But one day, someone saw through me: Inaba Himeko, fellow classmate in 1-C and vice president of the Cultural Research Club.

The moment I first realized she had me pegged, I was overcome with mind-numbing terror. It felt like I'd been caught doing something wrong. But on the other hand, part of me was *relieved*, too. Deep down, I guess I was yearning to change.

Fortunately, Inaban seemed to relate to my situation. She understood where I was coming from... or at least, I was hopeful that she did. It was all just guesswork on my part.

If I wanted to find out for sure, I'd need to be completely open, honest, and vulnerable with her—and I just wasn't brave enough for that.

I didn't want someone outside my usual circles to find out about me... and yet, at the same time, I couldn't quite suppress my desire to confess my secrets. As a result, the way I interacted with Inaban was completely inconsistent. I didn't know how to act around her, so I ended up playing the part of the damsel in distress—even though I *knew* she didn't like people like that.

And once I lost my "sense" for how to interact with someone, I was seldom able to recover.

I'd always liked Inaban, right from the start. She had a strong sense of self, and she kept a careful distance from other people, so she wasn't annoying to hang out with. Plus, we both seemed to have a similar outlook on life; even if she approached things differently, she still felt like a kindred spirit.

The downside to the two of us being so similar, however, was that it made it impossible for us to deepen our friendship. After all, one of us would have to deviate from our usual stance. Instead, we both kept testing the waters from a distance.

Did I want to meet her in the middle? Was I looking for someone I could truly connect with as a person? For that matter, *who was I* as a person?

The stalker thing and the talent scout thing were both problems I needed to take care of myself... and yet Inaban was helping me.

Was it right of me to let her?

I'd always tried my best to avoid causing trouble for my friends, lest it ruin my friendships with them. But because of that, the friendships that survived all felt artificial. My whole life started to feel like a lie.

Even if I did eventually find someone I could trust completely, would I ever find the confidence to call them a true friend?

The next morning, I met up with Inaban, and the two of us headed to school together.

She walked beside me, her posture perfectly straight—elegant at first glance, but also a bit stiff, like she was trying to make herself appear larger to ward off predators. Still, that sort of swagger was a perfect match for her demure beauty.

“Hey, Iori?” Inaba spoke suddenly, in a low voice. “About your so-called stalker... Can you describe how it feels when you think you’re being watched?”

“Umm...”

Seeing as I had yet to explain it in detail, I went ahead and described my experiences to her.

Next, she buried me in an avalanche of questions:

“Have you seen what they look like? When did it start? Around what time does it usually happen? How long does it last? How many times per day?”

Dutifully, I answered each question in turn.

“...Not that often, and not every day. I’ve only felt it five or six times so far.”

She folded her arms pensively. “Hmm.”

“Why do you ask?”

“Well... On Friday, after I walked you home... I felt someone watching me.”

SHE felt it? HER? Not ME?

“Oh god... Now they’re after you, too?!”

“Wh—Shhhh ! Keep your voice down, dumbass!”

“S-Sorry...” Some passersby looked over at us. I lowered my voice. “B-But... this means my stalker started following you instead, right? And they only noticed you because you were with me... so it’s my fault...”

My vision darkened. My whole life was nothing but misery; I needed to keep people out of it so the curse wouldn’t spread to

them, too. And yet—

“Hmph!”

“Ow!”

Inaban karate-chopped me on the head. Not gonna lie, it actually kinda hurt.

“Good grief, you’re the biggest idiot alive. Just because someone was watching me, you automatically assume they’re a stalker? And not just any stalker, but specifically *your* stalker? Don’t be absurd... That said, they did share some similarities with what you described.”

“See, I told y—ouch!”

Karate chop #2.

“Don’t give me that ‘I told you’ crap! God, you’re obnoxious! You don’t get to turn this into some tragic story where it’s all your fault, okay? We don’t know for sure that it was a stalker at all, much less yours.”

“O-Okay...”

“For now, let’s just wait and see what happens. Have you told anyone else about this?”

“N-No... Just you...”

“Then you should report it to your parents and the school, just in case. It’s up to you whether you want to tell your other fr—peers.”

“...Okay.”

For some reason, Inaban had stopped herself from saying the word *friends*.

“...or something like that! Crazy, huh? Right, Iori?”

“...Huh? Oh, uh, yeah.”

“I see what’s going on here... You weren’t even listening, were you?! You little rascal!”

Nakayama-chan playfully poked my tummy.

“Honestly, she didn’t miss much,” said Youko.

“Agreed,” said Haruna.

At this, Nakayama-chan slumped her shoulders. “Aww, man!”

These three girls were the “friends” I typically talked to and ate lunch with in class. After we finished eating, we spent the rest of the lunch period chatting.

“Just wondering, but... have you been feeling kinda blue lately?” Nakayama-chan asked me, peering curiously into my eyes.

“Huh? No, not at all.”

“Now that you mention it, she’s been pretty quiet...”

“Methinks the lady doth protest too much...”

“I mean it—Wh—What’s there to be sad about when I’ve got these guns?!” I rolled up my sleeve and flexed my bicep. Internally, I could feel myself shifting gears.

“Squish, squish!” Nakayama-chan poked my muscle.

“Hey, that ti—*that tickles!* ”

“Let me try!”

“Ooh, this is fun... I could get addicted to this.”

“Stop—You guys—Grrr, time for my revenge!” I reached out and clutched Nakayama-chan’s upper arms with both hands.

“It’s like a scene out of a love story...” Youko mused.

“First they embrace each other, and then they confess their love!” Haruna exclaimed.

I looked at Nakayama-chan. Our eyes met, and we exchanged a silent conversation: *Let’s go for it!*

“Iori...! I must confess, I’ve always—!”

“Wait,” I interrupted in a low, manly voice. “Let me go first. Ever since the first moment I laid eyes on you, I...”

“Ooh, Iori makes for a pretty hunky guy! Feels like we’re watching a musical!”

“Yeah! This is where the song starts, and then they do a dance number!”

“Cha-cha! Cha-cha-cha!”

“La la la la...!”

“Then the guy grabs the girl and jumps and lifts her into the air...”

“Ooh, like in figure skating? I’d kill to see that!”

“Okay, I’ll lift you.”

“R-Ready...?”

Then we turned to the others and shouted, “*Now you’re pushing it!*”

“Hahaha! You two are in *perfect* sync!”

“You just can’t stop yourselves from putting on a show, can you?”

“I-Iori? I think they’re messing with us!”

“I think you’re right, Nakayama-chan!”

At that point, I couldn’t hold it in any longer—and I burst out laughing. This, in turn, made Nakayama-chan start laughing, and

her laughter made *me* laugh even harder, and so on, until we were both clutching our sides. The smile on her face made my heart dance.

This is so much fun.

These people were my friends—Youko, Haruna, and obviously Nakayama-chan, too. But now, more than ever, I was certain their friendship only applied to the good times.

I couldn't burden them with my misery. They didn't want that. Doing so would only sap the fun out of the room... and out of the friendship itself.

I was afraid of rejection, and I had no idea how they'd react if I were to give them something they didn't want. The idea *terrified* me. I cared about our friendship too much to risk any major changes, so instead, I put it off for another day.

I couldn't tell them about the stalker thing. I needed to solve it myself. I couldn't let the misery spread to anyone else. I wanted to be the kind of person who made other people feel good... That way I could have friends...

Ugh .

Deep down, I knew my idea of "friendship" deviated from the norm. But right now, I was technically making it work—and I was scared of change.

This was just the sort of person I was. And that meant I needed to put in a lot of effort to keep things going smoothly.

The CRC didn't have club activities after school that day, so instead I found myself with Inaban.

"Hey, um, Inaban?"

"Let's hurry up and get out of here."

She walked briskly out of the classroom, so I followed her all the way to the shoe lockers. There was something I wanted to say to her, but I decided it could wait until we were somewhere more private.

Once we had left the school building, I tried again.

"Hey, Inaban? I realized something..."

"Spit it out."

"You're walking me home to keep me safe from the stalker... right?"

"How many times do we have to go over this? Yes, I am!"

"Well, the thing is... now *you* might have a stalker, right?"

"I might, I might not. We don't know yet."

"Okay, well, mine isn't set in stone either."

"So what?"

"So... I think *I* should walk *you* home this time."

She stared at me in shock for a moment. Then a few seconds ticked by... and that shock steadily shifted into incandescent rage.

"*Excuse me*?! The hell is wrong with you?! Have you forgotten why we're doing this?! Well, here's a refresher: because I can't trust you to stay safe on your own! There's no point in *you* trying to protect *me* when you can't even protect yourself! Is this some 'the hunter becomes the hunted' shit?! Actually, that analogy makes no sense, so never mind!"

Apparently she was so angry that she was starting to confuse herself.

"B-But Inaban... you said someone was watching you! So you're not safe either!"

"Who cares about me?! What'll you do if I'm not there with you?!"

"I... I'll figure something out..."

"If you were capable of that, then you wouldn't need me around in the first place, dipshit!"

"D-Don't call me a dipshit! You walking me home made sense before, but things are different now!"

"That doesn't mean we need a different plan, bonehead!"

"*Bonehead*?! Look—if I let you walk me home, then you'll have to walk all the way back by yourself!"

"I mean, yeah, that's what happens when two people walk home together, unless they're neighbors or something!"

Completely unrelated observation: I think Inaban enjoys making catty clapbacks like this.

"Listen... Maybe I can't keep myself out of danger, but I can at least try to protect you!"

"Argh! Enough! Let's just take a step back for a minute. This is all nothing but conjecture; we're wasting our time. We need to have a more constructive discussion." She took a deep breath, then exhaled. "Okay. Iori, do you have any other friends you trust? For that matter, did you tell people about the stalker thing? If so, have them walk with you."

"If I tell other people, then they'll get dragged into it, too... I really don't think I have any good friends I can talk to about this."

Normally I would never admit something like that, but with Inaban, I felt comfortable talking about it.

“Are you *sure* you can’t talk to them about it, or are you just scared to try?”

“Wait—Inaban, did you just say ‘*other* friends’? Are you saying we’re...?”

Wait, no, I didn’t mean to ask that right now! Is this the right time? I don’t know... Ugh, but now it’s too late—

“N-No!”

Rejection.

I could feel my heart breaking—*no, it’s just a crack. I can just paint over it. I can recover.*

Meanwhile, Inaba hastily continued, “I mean—we’re not friends, but we’re still... comrades? United under a common cause, you know, like... like sisters-in-arms!”

“What? What are you talking about?”

“Sh-Shut up! I’m describing how I see our relationship, damn it!”

Blushing, Inaban ran a hand through her hair. While her aggressive personality often kept other people at bay, to me it was completely endearing. Relatable, too, in a way. Before I knew it, I found I had regained my composure.

“Okay, real talk: what’s our plan?”

“Well... I still think our best option is for me to protect you, since you’re more at risk.”

“Ugh, there you go again! Listen—”

“Fucking hell, I’m never going to get anywhere with you, am I?! I *refuse* to back down about this!”

In the end, after going around and around in circles a few more times, we ultimately decided to settle it with a game of rock-paper-scissors. Sadly, Inaban won, so I had no choice but to let her escort me home. We were both exhausted from our argument, so we didn’t talk much on the way.

Comrades. Sisters-in-arms. I wasn’t opposed to it, since I’d never experienced it before. But this sort of relationship only existed so long as there was a common enemy to fight.

For some reason, I didn’t sense my stalker at all that day. Maybe they would be back tomorrow, or maybe they were gone forever. But once the danger was gone... would my “comrade” still stick around?

Over the next few days, Inaban continued to walk me home. Our compromise was thus: after I made it home safely, she would email me periodically on her way home until she, too, was safe.

I hadn't sensed my stalker at all lately, nor had that talent scout approached me since last time. And as I started to relax, the conversation between us grew more and more frequent.

"So, what'd you get on the history test?"

"An 82!"

"Hah! I win. 93."

"Aww, man! I lost again?! Ugh, I can never beat you!"

"I had an idea of what would be on the test, that's all. I'm impressed you scored so high, actually. You're pretty smart."

"Are you trying to say you thought I was stupid this whole time...?"

"Uh, obviously! Pretty girls like you tend to assume you can get anything you want in life by flirting with men."

"I beg your pardon, madam?! If anyone's the conniving bitch type, it's *you*!"

"Generally speaking, I choose not to use my femininity as a weapon. I'd rather crush them like the monster I am."

"I swear, you're the only person I know who would openly admit to being a monster... and it's really badass."

"What about you? What's your 'conniving bitch' quotient?"

"Hmmm... I'd say I'm an 'if you've got it, flaunt it' kinda gal."

"Yikes. You're gonna break a lot of guys' hearts, I can tell."

Unlike a lot of girls, Inaban was unabashedly open, honest, and direct. Talking to her felt more like talking to one of the guys—I knew I could relax and joke around without having to read too much into anything. And unless I was mistaken, Inaban seemed to enjoy talking to me, too.

In the classroom, she generally kept her barbed comments to a minimum. But in the clubroom, or when it was just the two of us, that was when her claws came out... and that, in turn, felt more like the *real* Inaban.

The days flew by uneventfully, and as time passed, my emotions began to stabilize.

After school, Inaban, Taichi, and I all left Classroom 1-C and headed for the clubroom. When we arrived, Yui and Aoki were already there.

"Why are you guys sitting so far apart?"

They were practically on opposite sides of the room.

“You’ll never believe it, Iori-chan! Yui told me if I come any closer, she’ll leave!”

“W-Well, I can’t be in a room alone with a guy—especially not you! Who knows what might happen!”

Yui was by far the cutest and most feminine of the CRC girls, but evidently she wasn’t all that comfortable with boys.

“I can’t help but wonder... Hmm... Maybe I should try to coax it out of her...” Inaban muttered under her breath.

We each took a seat, and then the discussion began.

“Looks like I’ve got everyone beat by an average of six points!” Inaban declared as she peered at Taichi’s graded history test.

“Rgh... I *know* I study more than you do!”

“Yeah, and that’s where you’re going wrong. You gotta study *smarter*, not harder.”

“But guess what?” I joined in. “I got the same score as you, Taichi! Twinsies!”

“What...?! But *you* hardly study at all... Ugh, kill me now...”

“Guys, relax! From where I’m standin’, you’re all practically geniuses! I mean, look at me—I’m failing three different subjects! Hahaha!”

“Aoki... I don’t think you understand, but like, that’s really, really bad. I mean, we’re already halfway through the semester. You might get held back.”

“Huh? Really...? Oh god, you legit feel bad for me...?! I... I’m gonna start studyin’! At least until I can get to fourth place! I’m gunnin’ for your spot, Yui!”

“I-Inaba! Will you tutor me?! If Aoki starts getting better grades than me, I’m totally gonna throw myself off the roof!”

Just another day in the clubroom, same as always. In a blink, this had become my home away from home—the place where I could remember what my life used to be like.

Every now and then I would stop and wonder what exactly made this place so special, but I could never seem to find an answer. Still... I had this inexplicable feeling that maybe, just maybe, I could make some real friends here. Whenever I imagined our future together, my heart ached with joy.

I was doing well with my club members, doing well with my classmates, and doing *really* well with Inaban. All my life, I’d struggled with despair... but now, for once, I could see a light at the

end of the tunnel. I was... happy. If only things could stay—

No, it's too early to get complacent. I need to aim higher. After all, a girl can dream.

But if I wanted something better than what I already had, I would need to step out of my comfort zone.

After club activities ended, once again, I headed home with Inaban.

“Man, it’s hot. I bet they’re gonna start selling summer clothes soon... which means it’s my big chance to buy a bunch of springtime clothes on clearance!”

In my single-parent household, we weren’t exactly struggling to get by, but we didn’t have the money to splurge on stuff. Hence, I made sure to spend as little as possible on clothes. As long as I had the basics in my wardrobe, I could still create some pretty cool outfits even if I didn’t have the latest in trendy clothes. I was tempted to go bargain hunting...

“Eh, it can wait.”

I’d only just bought some nice clothes at the start of the season. Besides, I was already making Inaban shuttle me to my house; it’d be rude to drag her on a detour.

“...Want me to come with you?”

“Huh?”

Was it just me, or did she just say something crazy?

“Rrgh, don’t make me repeat myself! I asked you if you wanted me to come with you, seeing as you’re scared of walking by yourself!”

“No, I’m not...”

Okay, maybe I was, just a little. She seemed to have sensed this. And while I didn’t want to burden her with more hassle... the prospect of hanging out downtown with her was actually really exciting.

“A-Anyway, nah, I wouldn’t ask you to do that! I don’t *need* to buy any clothes—”

Wait, what? She was the one who offered, and I *did* want to go, so why was I turning her down? Was I lying? No... Deep down, I was scared of screwing up and damaging the relationship we had. Instead of trying to improve it, I was focused on maintaining the status quo.

“Well, I won’t force you, obviously.”

Now that I had declined, Inaban was starting to back down.

What am I doing?! I need to take that first step! It's now or never!

"On second thought, actually, please do come with me! I'd really like that!" I blurted all at once.

Inaba recoiled slightly. "Chill out, would you? Anyway, I'm free tomorrow..."

Though she tried to act like I was twisting her arm, I could tell from her voice that she was a tiny bit pleased... but I kept that to myself, of course.

The next day, our club activities ended after a quick chat, as we'd agreed upon in advance. This way we could spend a good two hours downtown and still get home reasonably early.

At the school gates, we said our goodbyes to Taichi and the others, then headed off together.

"W-Well then, off we go!" I declared.

"Y-Yeah."

"You're still cool with going to the place we talked about yesterday?"

"Oh, uh, yeah."

Silence fell between us.

"...Why are you all stiff and awkward, Inaban?"

"I'm not awkward, *you're* awkward! Dumbass!"

Another moment of silence... and then we burst out laughing. What a couple of dorks.

"Feels like we're going on a first date or something. Keheheh!"

"In a way, we kind of are."

Looking back, I'd hung out with friends on multiple occasions, but rarely ever one-on-one.

"Are you coming on to me...?"

"Not particularly!"

After a short train ride, we stepped out into the downtown area. We were only going clothes shopping, and yet for some reason I was on cloud nine.

All this time, I told myself I wanted to be friends with everyone, but at some point, I had stopped trying to engage with people on a personal level.

Our first stop was an eight-story retail building just outside the station. The plan was to take a quick look around and get a feel for all the specialty stores.

"What kind of clothes do you buy usually?" I asked her.

"I don't care too much about fashion, but..."

She looked around the store, her tone calm and unaffected. On our way here, I was terrified that we wouldn't have a good time, but we both seemed pretty comfortable with each other.

Silence fell between us as the conversation petered out... and yet I didn't feel obligated to revive it. Instead, the silence felt peaceful. Was this what it would feel like to have a boyfriend? If so, then maybe it would be fun to date someone... That said, I'd need to actually have a crush on someone first.

"...Sorry. I don't know anything about clothes, so I'm not the best person to talk to."

"Oh, no, that's fine! I don't mind the quiet!"

While Inaban seemed cold and insensitive at first blush, I'd realized quite some time ago that she was actually a delicate girl who would often fret over small details.

"With you, I don't feel pressured to talk constantly." I was comfortable around her, after all.

"Oh. Gotcha." She nodded and didn't press further.

Ooh, I think I see something cute over there!

Likewise, Inaban had pulled a dress off the rack to examine it.

...Wait, a DRESS?!

To me, this was so unexpected that I had half a mind to tease her for it, but I suppressed the urge; I could already picture her shouting "I didn't care about this stupid dress anyway!" and storming away. So instead, I decided I'd wait until she was tempted to buy it, then egg her on. *Heh heh heh.*

"I'm gonna go check out that section real quick," I told her.

"Oh, okay."

We were so comfortable together, I didn't feel obligated to hover by her side at all times. Here I was, essentially operating on low-power mode, and yet she didn't seem bothered in the slightest. Was she a special case? Or was my low-power mode not quite as boring as I thought?

With a skip in my step, I jogged over to the other side of the store—

"Oh hey, it's Iori!"

Suddenly, I heard a familiar voice. I glanced to the right. It was Youko, my "friend" from class. Next to her was Haruna, my other "friend."

"What's up?"

“Huh? Oh, uh... you know...”

What am I doing? Come on, snap out of it!

But for some reason, I found I couldn't switch modes. I was too far “off” to revert back to “on” at a moment's notice. *They're going to think I'm acting weird... Well, maybe they won't actually mind—*

Just then, I noticed that a third girl was standing with them. She wasn't in our class, and I didn't know her name, but I recognized her as a fellow Yamaboshi first-year.

“Oh, is this Nagase Iori-chan? Oh. My. Gosh. It's great to see you up close for once! You're, like, mega adorbs! I heard you're the class clown of 1-C.”

There was a *click* as the switch in my brain finally flipped.

“What are you folks up to? Shopping? Oh, I guess this is the first time we've talked, huh? Nice to meetcha!” I grinned, extending a hand.

“Yeah, totally! I'm Iijima Maki!”

Judging from her thick makeup and her valley-girl voice, she seemed like a gyaru. I had nothing against gyaru girls personally, but for whatever reason I always struggled to get along with them.

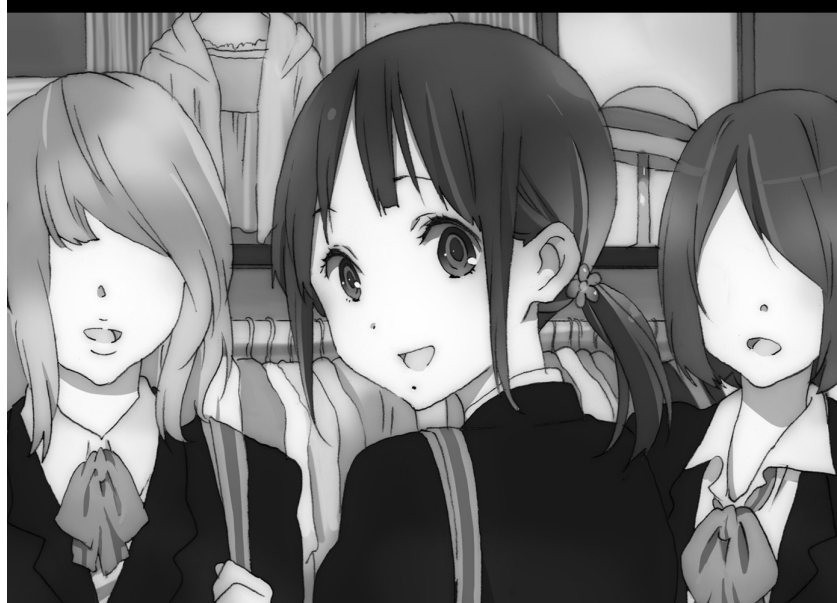
“We're just looking at clothes and stuff. Look what I got!” Youko reached into her shopping bag and pulled out a tank top. “Isn't it cute?”

“Yeah, totally! Very sexy!”

“How so?”

“It'll emphasize your boobs, that's how! ...Gah, now look what you made me say!”

“Hahahaha! You're such a goofball, Iori-chan! I love it!”



The conversation was going surprisingly well. Idly, I wondered what Inaban was up to. I turned my head—and our eyes met.

“Uh oh.”

She was looking straight at me, her expression blank. *I need to get back over there*, I thought to myself. I could already feel her starting to distance herself.

“What about mine? I said ‘screw it’ and went with red!”

“Spicy like a hot pepper! If I was a bull, I would charge right at it! Uhh... I mean... not that I want to gore you or anything!”

“You’re just digging yourself deeper, Iori-chan! Hahaha!”

“I’m just giving the people what they want, man!”

What am I doing? I need to tell them I’ve got a friend waiting for me so I can get out of here! It’s okay—they aren’t trying too hard to keep me around, so they won’t hate me for leaving. I need to get back to Inaban and switch over to low-power mode.

...Do I really NEED to switch back, though? I don’t HAVE to be on low power with her, do I? Nah, I don’t need to change gears. Wait, but... will SHE be comfortable with that?

I was hesitating, but I didn’t know why. I couldn’t make sense of it. And my brain’s attempt at solving this was to procrastinate on the more important decision while prioritizing the situation right in front of me.

“Anyway, are you busy? We were gonna go to karaoke after this.”

“Karaoke, huh? Sounds great! But... I actually—”

“You should go with them.”

An icy knife pierced my chest, cleaving my heart in two.

No... Wait... I was just about to wrap this up!

“Inaba-san? Oh, did you guys come here together? Well, why didn’t you say so, silly? Seriously, Inaba-san, where were you hiding all this time?”

“I just didn’t want to interrupt the fun,” Inaban replied, a forced smile plastered onto her face.

Sure, we were having fun—but your presence wouldn’t have ruined it, Inaban. Please, I need you to understand that!

“You aren’t interrupting, don’t worry! Anyway, wanna join us for karaoke, Inaba-san?”

“I’ve actually got other plans after this. You should take Iori with you, though.”

"No, that'd be mean! We can't just steal her away from you! Maybe we could meet back up after your other plans."

"I don't need her. She was just tagging along for the hell of it."

"Oh, really?" Youko asked me.

"Huh? I mean, yeah, we didn't really have serious plans together, but..."

Why is the conversation headed down this road? I don't get it. How do I put things back on track? What persona do I need to use in order to—oh.

Wow. Listen to me. I sound like I'm trying to deceive my friends on purpose.

"Anyway, I'll see you tomorrow at school."

And with that, Inaban walked off.

"I-Inaban! I... um..."

Should I use my goofy persona to drag her back here? No... Maybe I should tell the girls she and I are hanging out one-on-one today? Which option would resolve everything more smoothly? Which one is more normal? Well, if I'm aiming for the most natural resolution to the conflict, then...

"S-See you tomorrow!" I called after her.

All I could do was watch her go.

"Um... Were we intruding on something...?" Haruna asked anxiously.

"No, no, it's fine," I replied, donning a false smile.

Tomorrow, I'll need to apologize to Inaban about what happened, I thought to myself. I had already sent her an "I'm sorry" email, but as I expected, she only replied with "About what?"

Clearly I was going to have to speak with her in person—but what would I say? If I wanted to get my feelings across, then I was going to need to have a deep, serious conversation with her. *Should I really let myself be that vulnerable? Isn't it too risky? What if she doesn't even show up at the meetup spot tomorrow morning?*

I agonized over these questions until late that night... and the next morning, I slept through my alarm.

"Crap, crap, crap!"

I didn't waste time eating breakfast—just washed my face, threw on my uniform, and dashed out of the house. My mom was still asleep; her job had her coming home really late every night this week.

As I ran, I tied my hair back into a ponytail. If there were no delays, and I caught my connecting train, I might still make it in time... or would I? It was hard to tell.

Fortunately, my full-speed dash enabled me to catch the train I needed right as it was about to depart. (Sorry, Mr. Conductor.) Then I positioned myself at the “meetup spot” by the middle doors of the last train car. This was how we met up each morning: if Inaban saw me through the window when the train pulled into her station, then she would board the train, but if I didn’t see her waiting out there, then I would get off and wait for her to arrive.

Granted, I could still count on one hand the number of times we had met up in this fashion, but to me, it was my new routine... even if I knew it wouldn’t last forever. But today in particular, I *needed* her to be there. I didn’t want it to end like this. *Seriously, of all the days I could’ve overslept!* Silently, I cursed my folly.

Knowing Inaban, she’d probably already caught an earlier train. She’d never risk being late to school, after all. And yet... part of me still held out hope that she would wait until the last train. Arrogant, I know. But I was so sure Inaban would go the extra mile for me.

At Inaban’s station, the train rolled to a stop. But rather than look through the window and find my answer, I stared at the floor and waited for the doors to open. I wanted to believe that fate would bring us together, just like it did the day we met.

I heard the doors open and looked up. In walked a man in a business suit, a university student, and a few fellow high-schoolers.

But Inaban wasn’t among them.

In the end, I arrived at the classroom right as the final bell was ringing. Class started right away, so I didn’t have time to talk to Inaban. Instead, I planned to approach her after class.

Time ticked by, and then first period came to an end. *It’s go time.* I jumped to my feet and headed over to her.

“Oh, hey, Iori! Karaoke was a total blast yesterday!” called Haruna.

“Y-Yeah, totally! Let’s go again sometime!” I replied with a smile and a thumbs-up.

While I was distracted, however, Inaban rose from her desk and started to head for the door. Hastily, I flagged her down.

“Inaban!”

“...What is it?”

Her tone was frightening, as was the look in her eyes. Something told me she was *pissed* .

“I, um... I wanted to apologize about yesterday—oh, but first I should apologize about this morning! I completely overslept, and I didn’t even have time to send you an email to let you know! I mean, assuming you waited for me—”

“Nah, I didn’t wait for you. Don’t worry about it.”

“Oh... O-Okay then... Good.”

Yeah... It was a good thing that I hadn’t created any hassle on her end. A very good thing, to be sure... But did I actually believe that, or was I just trying to tell myself I did?

“And another thing—I’m *really* sorry about yesterday! First I dragged you there, and then I ditched you... Me personally, I wanted to keep shopping with you, but then you said you had plans, so...”

“Yeah, I know,” she replied flatly. “Is that all? I need to go.”

“Oh, um... yeah.”

I wanted to stop her. There was so much more I wanted to say. I wasn’t doing this right—I knew that. But I didn’t know what the “right” response would look like.

And so Inaban walked off.

Did I screw up...?

All my life, I only ever focused on *getting along* . But now, for once, I had taken a step out of my comfort zone to try to foster something deeper. Unfortunately, this attempt had ended in disaster. Now she hated me so much, she’d given up on me as a person.

How could I possibly ask her to walk me home after that? I couldn’t.

I wanted to make it work, but I couldn’t.

I wanted to make friends, but I couldn’t.

Why am I such a failure?

+ + +

“So yeah, we were going to and from school together, but we both had some misconceptions about each other,” Iori explained.

You can say that again, Inaba thought.

“Wait, that’s *it*?!” Yui shouted. “You spent all that time thinking about it and all you said was, like, five sentences?!”

“What’s wrong with that?” Aoki asked.

“Nothing, but like... How is it they had this cool friendship moment with each other, but not with me?! Why’d you guys have to leave me out?!”

“It’s a little late for that now.”

“I’m *not* just going to shrug my shoulders about this, Taichi, you blockhead!”

“Then what sort of solution would you suggest, Yui-san?”

“I don’t know! Think of something for me, Chihiro-kun!”

“Why me...?”

“Oh boy... Someone’s set off the chirpy little raging tiger,” Inaba muttered. Every now and then, Yui could get *really* annoying.

“Chirping *tiger*?! Those things don’t even go together! And don’t talk down to me!”

“H-Hey, um... Maybe we could cut Her Chirpiness a break and go back to the story now...? You haven’t told us how the situation with the stalker and the talent scout was resolved. Which one of you exterminated them?”

“Ouch... When Shino-chan says it, it doesn’t really sound like a joke anymore... Ugh, maybe I should go home and think about the kind of person I want to be...”

“Holy moly! Shino-chan’s powers of snark are getting so strong, they can smash Yui’s self-esteem with a single strike! The girl’s unstoppable!” For some reason, Iori sounded rather pleased about this.

“I don’t think this really needs to be said, but I’ll go ahead and give you your punchline, Shino: nobody exterminated anybody.”

“What? *What?!* ”

“Seriously, how are you surprised by this? Whatever. Here’s how the story ended, alright?”

And so Inaba picked back up where Iori had left off.



Trust issues. The belief that her true self was “unwanted.” A deep fear of failure. And above all, a desire to change.

These were the key components that made up both Inaba Himeko and Nagase Iori—though to what degree, I couldn’t be certain. All I knew was that we were birds of a feather.

But though we were similar in nature, we each had our own

approach to life. In my case, I put up walls and kept people at arm's length to protect myself. In Iori's case, however, she kept herself safe by using friendship and diplomacy to frame herself as harmless.

The morning after Iori ditched me for her other friends, I waited for her at the station. But she didn't show up, so I caught the train without her. Later, I was relieved to learn that she had simply overslept... but when she asked me if I'd waited for her, I told her I hadn't.

Why? I didn't know—actually, no, I was probably just lashing out at her.

When I saw her talking with her other friends and being her usual bubbly self—the way she never was when she was with me—it pissed me off. That was why I left. Now here I stood, awash in shame and deep, deep guilt. *God, I'm such a fucking child. I need to apologize to her—maybe on the walk home.*

“Inaban!”

Only one person ever called me by that nickname. I looked up from my desk to find Iori standing a short distance away—*wait, what?* No, she was next to my desk. She really wasn't far at all. So why did it feel that way?

“Listen, um... You don't have to walk me home anymore.”

Her tone was serious enough that I didn't feel comfortable pushing back on her decision. All I could say was:

“Alright.”

Iori nodded, but I couldn't tell if her expression was one of sorrow or guilt. Was this how it would end? Were we going to revert back to the way we were before?

Why was I so opposed to that?

“Hey, uh... Just checking, but are you still upset about what happened th—”

Just then, a pair of pigtails entered my field of vision as Nakayama Mariko latched onto Iori.

“Hey, Iori! You know how we all went to karaoke last night? Well, it turns out Youko forgot to bring her coupon, and it expires tomorrow! So she's thinking about going again tonight—and yours truly is on board, of course! You'll come with us, right?”

“Huh? Oh, uh... I...”

“While I'm here, what about you, Inaba-san?”

“I'll pass.”

“Gotcha... Okay, well, we're making plans over there. Come

with me!”

“Uh—wha—?”

And so Nakayama dragged her off. As I watched, they joined the biggest, giggliest group in the room... and naturally, Iori fit right in.

“Hah,” I scoffed under my breath, then leaned back in my chair. I felt so stupid. She didn’t belong with someone like me—she belonged with *them* .

Iori didn’t turn up at the clubroom that day. Instead, she probably left campus to hang out with Nakayama and their other friends. Naturally, this resulted in me going home alone.

It had been a while since the last time I walked home by myself, and it felt... colder, somehow. But even at home, my mood still didn’t improve. I sat around in my room for a while, ate dinner, then holed up in my room again.

I sat down at my desk. A moment passed. Then I leapt to my feet and started pacing. I looked at the clock—8:30 PM. Try as I might, I couldn’t get her out of my mind. Was karaoke over now? Was she home safe? Or did they opt to stay late? I could trust Nakayama to wrap things up at a reasonable hour, but what about the other girls with them?

Ugh, listen to me right now. What am I, her mom?

Surely Iori asked one of the other girls to walk home with her. I had nothing to worry about. Then I remembered that her mother worked late into the night... but I pushed it from my mind.

Goddamn it, I can’t get it out of my head. What is WRONG with me? Why am I so obsessed with some random classmate? Fuck this shit.

I could feel a weight in my chest.

Maybe this friendship just isn’t worth it if it’s only going to make me miserable.

Just then, my cell phone started to ring, its green light flashing, from atop my desk. My heart skipped a beat. If it was an email, the buzzing would have stopped by now, but no. Someone was calling me. I grabbed the phone and checked the display.

Incoming Call: Nagase Iori

What could you possibly want from me now? I thought to myself. You only want to talk to me when you need something, is that it?

I stared down at the phone as it continued to ring and buzz. She was awfully persistent about talking to me, apparently. *Just give up already, would you? I’m sick of tearing my hair out over you. I*

entertained the idea of turning my phone off, but I couldn't find the courage to go through with it.

Meanwhile, the phone rang... and rang... and rang. Eventually I gave in and answered.

"Hello?"

"Oh! Um... Inaban... I... I think someone's... There's a stranger outside my house, and... I'm scared."

I leapt to my feet and dashed out of the house.

As I ran to the train station, I stayed on the line with Iori so she could keep me updated.

According to her, when she arrived at home that night, she walked to the window to close the curtains—at which point she noticed an unfamiliar man looking at her bedroom window. At first she told herself she was overreacting, but every time she peeked out through the gap in the curtains, she found that he was still there, still looking. This had gone on for over an hour now, and she was starting to think he was the stalker she was worried about.

When she told me she was home alone, I encouraged her to call the police, but she wasn't sure they would take action, since there was no proof of any crime. Eventually I decided it would just be faster for me to go there myself. However, I instructed her to either call the cops or take refuge with a neighbor if things got any worse.

Meanwhile, I boarded the train and set off in the direction of her station. As it rolled along, it occurred to me that I could have hailed a taxi instead, and I cursed my idiocy. Every stop in between drove me mad with impatience.

When I finally arrived at Iori's station, I ran out of the train car, past the turnstiles, and onto the street. According to her last update, the man was still just standing there. *What am I DOING?* I thought to myself. Why was I coming to her rescue? She was just some random classmate. *What am I, her boyfriend?*

I didn't know if she was actually in any danger. And if she was, then she was better off calling the police or turning to someone who could actually protect her. But I couldn't count on her to actually follow through on that advice, hence why I was headed there.

How lucky for her that she has me to turn to! She's probably just using me... Whatever. I don't care anymore.

I didn't have time to make a list of pros and cons. This was happening regardless.

Go ahead and laugh at me later if you have to. If I don't do this, I know I'm going to regret it. Nothing can convince me otherwise.

Then Iori's apartment complex came into view, so I dialed her number. I'd only been running for five minutes or so, and yet I was completely out of breath. *God, I'm so out of shape.*

"Haah... haah... How's it... going...? Is he... still there?"

"He's... He's by the east building... standing under the overhang."

"Haah... haah... Okay... East building..."

Once I got my breath under control, I made sure to stay as quiet as possible as I snuck around the building. *Which way is east? Over there? Aha! There he is.*

Sure enough, a man was standing there, keeping watch on the Nagase family's apartment. Judging from the angle of his head, he was looking at Iori's bedroom window.

I swallowed hard. The saliva clung to my parched throat, forcing me to swallow again. Here I was, face to face with Iori's stalker. This was the first time I'd ever seen one in real life; stupid as it was, I'd always hoped they were just a staple of fiction and nothing more.

My mind replayed the vague memory of some news segment I'd watched a long time ago: *Investigators say the killer repeatedly stalked his victim prior to the murder.* Hastily, I shook the morbid thoughts away.

Goosebumps pricked up my arms, and my stomach was in knots, but I forced myself not to think about it. *This isn't a TV show, okay? This is real life. Keep it together. I can solve this.*

Then my legs started to shake—but that was just from all the running I did on my way here. I wasn't scared or anything.

There were no street lights where the man was positioned, and I had set up camp approximately ten-plus meters behind him to keep watch. With these two factors combined, I couldn't quite make out the features of his face.

"There's definitely a guy out here. All I can tell is that he's wearing a hat."

"Sorry to make you come all this way... It's really not safe."

"Don't worry about it. And for the record, you didn't 'make' me. I felt like coming over, so I did."

"But if I hadn't called you about it—"

"Oh my god, will you shut the fuck up?! I'm sick of your shit,

Iori! We can worry about all that *after* we figure this out! Focus!”

I was tired of her constantly waffling back and forth. Never mind the fact that I was waffling about it myself up until tonight.

Anyone would be scared in her shoes.

“At this point, I think you’ve got more than enough grounds to call the cops about this.”

“N-Not yet... I don’t want to turn it into a huge ordeal unless I have to. My mom will freak out, and... it’s possible one of her ex-husbands might get involved. And I really don’t want that.”

Good lord, how complicated is your home life?

“Alright, alright. We’ll put a pin in that idea for now.”

So what was their next move? Without the police, they’d need to solve it themselves. And sure, if they sat here until he left, the immediate crisis would be averted—but it wouldn’t be a permanent fix.

Should we make a scene to drive him away? No, that’s still just putting a band-aid over the real problem. For that matter, is this the same guy I caught looking at me? In which case... am I in danger, too...?

My breath quickened and my chest grew tight. I still had the option to back out. If I left right now, I would be safe. But if I stayed, I would be taking a tremendous risk. That much was plain as daylight.

“Inaban?”

“Gaaahh! D-Don’t startle me like that!”

“Uh... We’re on the phone, aren’t we? All I said was your name.”

“Oh, lay off! Anyway, what do you want?”

“Well... we don’t know for sure that he’s watching me, so I was thinking maybe we should find out.”

“Right... I guess that makes sense.” There were plenty of other apartments in this complex, so there *was* a chance (however small) that he was looking at someone else’s.

“Okay, I’m gonna leave the house.”

“Alright... Wait, what?!”

“I’m gonna walk outside, and if he ignores me, then we’ll know he’s not after me.”

“You better be goddamn careful about this, you hear me?!”

Seriously, the hell is she thinking? Dumbass!

“I... I’m sorry to do this after you came all this way, but... I really don’t want to drag you into my mess, so I’m gonna hang up.”

“Wha—HEY! Damn it, she hung up on me!”

I tried to call back, but she didn’t answer. *Oh, NOW you’re magically feeling brave, you coward? I might’ve been impressed if I couldn’t CLEARLY hear your voice shaking!*

I was scared just sitting here, so I couldn’t imagine what it must’ve felt like for her. Why did she only think to take action once I got here? Was... Was it *because* I was here?

She claimed she didn’t want to “drag me into her mess,” but I knew she wasn’t really as strong as she was letting on. She was just putting on a tough-girl act for her audience—*oh, right. I do that, too.*

Perhaps Iori had only taken action because she’d realized that I was frightened... in the same way I’d dashed over to her house the second I heard the terror in her voice.

Her bedroom light clicked off. Then, twenty or thirty seconds later, she stepped out onto the street with me and the stalker—about fifteen meters away from him, by my estimate.

For the briefest of moments, she shot a glance in his direction. Then she turned in the opposite direction and started walking, like she hadn’t even noticed he was there. Was she trying to lure him away?

Then she entered his field of vision. Still, I couldn’t risk calling her back—not yet. Not until I could be sure he’d noticed. As he stared after her, I stared after him, observing him.

From my position, I could no longer get a visual on her. Just then, I felt my phone buzz; I answered it straight away. I was pretty sure the stalker couldn’t hear me from this distance, but nevertheless, I cupped a hand over the receiver to muffle the sound.

“Is it working?”

“Don’t give me that shit! What you’re doing is extremely reckless!”

“Too bad. I’m already doing it.”

“Tsk... Fine, whatever. So far, he hasn’t moved. And for the record, I can’t see you from here.”

“I’m just gonna keep heading straight down this road, and I won’t look back.”

“Good idea. Try to act natural. Once you’ve walked for a while, find a store and kill time inside.”

My heartbeat raced as sirens went off in my head. It almost felt like we were characters in a crime drama... Then again, seeing as we were literally surveilling a criminal, maybe there was no

“almost” about it.

“Still nothing?”

“Nothing.”

Thankfully, the stalker didn’t show any signs of taking action. In fact, perhaps this man wasn’t really a “stalker” at—*wait, what?*

“Hold on... He’s doing something.”

The man crouched down and began to sneak around the side of the apartment building. I watched him go, all the while silently pleading: *please don’t follow her. Please just go the other way. Please prove to me that... you’re not... a stalker...*

“He’s... headed in your direction.”

“What? For real?” I could hear the chill in her voice.

I need to instruct her—but what should I have her do? For that matter, what should I be doing? What do I... How do we... Oh, for fuck’s sake, CALM DOWN!

“Don’t turn back. Don’t provoke him. I’ll tail him from a distance.”

I stepped out onto the sidewalk and started walking. *Oh god, what am I DOING?* I could feel my phone growing slick with sweat from my palm. My nerves had hit my stomach, and nausea was on its way, but I ignored it. Instead, I kept walking—quietly, carefully.

No one else was on the street, save for the occasional passerby on a bicycle, but there was no time for me to flag them down and ask for help. It was taking everything I had to maintain the perfect distance—close enough to keep tabs on him, but not close enough to the point that he noticed I was there.

Up ahead, I caught a glimpse of Iori, and relief flooded my chest. But just like that, she was gone again. If I got a little closer, could I keep an eye on both of them simultaneously? No, maybe that was too risky... After a moment of deliberation, I decided it was best to avoid his notice at all costs. Even if it meant I couldn’t get a visual on Iori myself, I needed to stay a good thirty meters behind him for my own safety.

“Wh... What do we do...? Actually, if you think about it... is this our best chance to catch him ourselves?”

“Don’t bite off more than you can chew, you idiot! Just keep walking and playing dumb!”

She was going to give me a heart attack at this rate. Maybe the fear was starting to get to her.

Quietly, I continued to tail the stalker. It was too dark to make

out any of his features, but fortunately there was no one else around, so I was in no danger of losing him. As he passed under a streetlight, I could vaguely make out his dark-colored attire.

“We’re never going to get anywhere if I just keep walking forever.”

“Go to the police station—no, even just a convenience store will do the trick. If you find a store, go inside.”

“O-Okay.”

See? I’m instructing her. Look at me, level-headed in a crisis. I can do this.

Then the road began to slope downward. From my high vantage point, I could see Iori about twenty meters ahead of the stalker. Added to my thirty meters behind him, that made for a total of fifty meters between myself and her—about the length of a sprint in gym class. I relayed this information to Iori over the phone.

“Just don’t force yourself to do this, okay? If it gets dicey, leave me and run.”

“Right back at you.”

Seriously, if anyone’s overextending themselves, it’s you. And yet she seemed to feel the same way about me. Our opinions were at total odds with each other... but in a sense, they were also in perfect sync.

She turned a corner and disappeared from my line of sight. The stalker hastened his pace so as to not lose sight of her. Likewise, I did the same.

He was moving so quickly, he was practically running—so I started running, too. And the faster I moved, the more I began to panic. The intensity of the situation seemed to magnify twofold.

Then the stalker rounded the same corner, and I lost sight of him as well. With both of them out of view, my imagination went wild with worst-case scenarios. What if he ran up and grabbed her? Or worse?

I was terrified. Terrified that it would be my fault—*no! This isn’t about me; this is about Iori! Who gives a shit what happens to me? She’s... He’s...!*

As I approached the corner, I started running at full speed. And when I rounded it—I found him standing there. Facing me.

Please tell me this is a different guy. Tell me I’m not standing face to face with Iori’s stalker!

Our eyes met. We were standing at a distance, but I was under a

streetlight, which meant he could probably see my face. As for him, he had the brim of his cap pulled down low over his eyes... just like the stalker I'd been tailing.

We were ten meters apart... no, twenty? *Is that close or far? I can't tell.* My powers of analysis were fading, and now I was rooted to the spot.

After a beat, I realized my error.

If I had just kept walking, I could have masqueraded as an ordinary passerby, but now that possibility was long gone. The stalker had noticed me; worst case scenario, it was possible he'd been stalking *me*, too. In other words, I was in danger... and yet I just stood there, my feet frozen in place, my phone still pressed to my ear.

Why did I ever decide to go on this suicide mission? This wasn't like me—I wasn't usually this stupid. So what the hell happened? Why would I—

"Inaban? What's wrong?" Iori asked over the phone.

"Don't turn back. Just go."

No matter what happens, I'll never regret making this choice... because I know I'd only regret it more otherwise.

It surprised me just how strong I felt in that moment.

I can do this... I can do this, damn it!

"Inaban...? Is something going on?!"

Apparently my instructions had backfired on me.

Out of the corner of my eye, I could spot a shadowy figure. And when I looked at it, the man turned and looked over his shoulder, following my gaze.

"...Oh."

It was Iori. Now she and the stalker were staring each other in the face. He was standing about... fifteen, twenty meters from me, and she was another... twenty or twenty-five meters from him. We had him flanked on both sides.

What is happening right now? I couldn't begin to process it. My animal instincts screamed at my brain—*do something! Figure it out! Take action! Hurry up—every second counts!*

The man was now fully conscious of both me and Iori.

Option 1: fight him. One adult man versus two teenage girls—he would have the advantage. Plus, we couldn't predict what kind of weapons a stalker might carry on him.

Option 2: run. If we split up, he would be forced to choose one

of us to chase after, thereby sparing the other... but the less fortunate of us would be placed in massive danger. *Pass .*

Option 3: do nothing—that would be sheer idiocy.

What do I do? These options all suck!

Then I realized: I was too focused on the short-term. Even if we got away from him this time, there would always be a next time... unless we did something to prevent it.

Call the cops? They won't arrive in time. Go on the defensive, or go on the offensive? What about Iori?

I looked over at her... and the second she came into view, I knew what had to be done.

She was too far away for me to make out her expression—especially in the shadows—but when I looked at her, I knew I needed to fight. For the first time in my life, I was going to prioritize someone else's well-being over my own.

My heart raced. *Why do I feel so compelled to save her? And why do I feel like I can actually do it? Is this how it feels... to help people?*

I balled my hands into fists, holding tight to the power I'd just discovered inside myself.

I was going to talk to him. He probably wouldn't attack me without warning—no, I wouldn't let him.

Was I going to talk him out of stalking her? No, I wasn't that naive. Instead, I was going to debate him. If he was afraid of getting arrested, I'd quote penal code at him; if he was intimidated, I'd threaten him; and if he was gripped by some twisted desire, I'd cut a deal with him—anything to stop him. If he fell for it, awesome. I was ready to do whatever it took to buy time for Iori to escape.

Just in case, I put emergency number 110 on speed dial on my phone. *Perfect .*

"Let's do th—"

"Let's do this!"

"...Huh?"

Right as I was about to take a stand, a certain someone else took it for me. *You're joking, right?*

"The hell are you planning to do?"

"You tell me, Inaban."

"I was just going to t—"

"I was just going to talk to him."

"Quit copying me!" I hissed. *What, like you came to the exact same conclusion I did, purely by coincidence? Fat chance.*

"I'm not 'copying' anybody! This doesn't even involve you, Inaban! Get out of here!"

Excuse me?

"You're slower than me, so you'll need a head start! Just leave him to me! Unlike you, I can outrun him!"

Are you fucking kidding me?

Out of nowhere, the damsel in distress was suddenly acting like a hero—and stealing *my* spotlight.

Here was a girl who seemed to have it all... everything except friends, or so she claimed. But just when I thought she needed me, she started acting like *I* was the helpless burden. *Who do you think you are?*

I refused to let her one-up me. My pride wouldn't allow it. Just how selfish could she possibly be? She infuriated me, and now I was going to give her a piece of my mind.

"Bullshit! This *does* involve me, actually! And I'm already committed to doing this, so just back off! It's not safe for you to take the reins here!"

As I shouted, I could feel a weight lift from my shoulders.

"What's that supposed to mean?!"

"I'm trying to keep you from getting hurt, you nimrod!"

God, how embarrassing. But I knew if I didn't get it off my chest, I'd only stress myself out.

"Why?! This is my problem... I... I can't let you—"

"Yeah, well, your problems are my problems, too! I've already made up my mind about this, so just *let me help you!*"

On the other end of the line, I heard her voice catch in her throat. *Gotcha. I win!*

Without wasting another moment, I started walking.

"W-Wait! That doesn't count!"

Just a few steps later, I spotted her walking over in my direction.

"No, *you* wait! And by 'wait,' I mean get out of here! We can't both be the bait! And you know I'm the better debater!"

"But *I'm* the one he's interested in, so it'll be more effective coming from me!"

"And more risky! Way, way more risky!"

"I refuse to put you in danger, Inaban! You're too... You're...!"

This time it was my turn to falter. Was she going to say the very thing I'd never found the courage to say?

If she said it first, she could probably stop me in my tracks... Did that mean it would have the same effect on her? If I said it first, could I stop her? I didn't have any concrete evidence in that regard, but we were already pretty clearly on the exact same wavelength, so I wanted to believe it would work.

Yes... For once, I was going to beat Iori at her own game—

“Y-Yeah, and I... uhh... you...”

Fuck! I can't do it!

If I could just get the words out, I would win, and Iori would stay safe. How was it this difficult? *It's now or never, dumbass!*

Meanwhile, I kept walking. If I didn't hurry up, we'd *both* end up putting ourselves within range of the stalker... and I was running out of time. *Come on! Stop her!*

I'd been conscious of my worst traits for a while now. That was why I stopped trying to form genuine connections; instead, I just established a handful of shallow friendships. But this only left an empty void in my heart, and deep down, I wanted to find what I'd truly been missing... and right now, if I could just put myself out there—

I took a step forward.

I've made up my mind.

Another step.

I'm going to say it.

I was now close enough to see Iori clearly; I could feel something hot welling in my chest. Then I saw the desperate determination on her face.

For once, I'd found someone who was willing and able to go toe to toe with me.

I can do it. I can say it. I'm going to say it!

“I...!”

She was Nagase Iori, and she was my—

Just then, I noticed a large, dark blur on the right-hand side of my vision... about 180 centimeters tall, by my estimation... wearing dark clothes and a cap pulled down low...

“Oh crap! THE STALKER!”

“AAAAHHH! THE STALKER!”

“WHAT?! STALKER?!”

Shit. I'd spent too much time thinking while my body was on autopilot, and now it was too late—we'd both walked all the way up to the stalker. This was a critical error. How could I have let this

happen?

Not only that, but Iori had screamed along with me. Did the exact same thing happen to her, too? Plus, there was that deeper third scream... *Wait—a THIRD scream? And if Iori and I are just five meters apart... where does that put the stalker?!*

The man in black was now just two or three meters away.

“Iori, no! Get back! Get away from the stalker!”

“Get out of here, Inaban! Hurry! Before the stalker... y’know...!”

“Huh...? Who, me...? Guys, I’m NOT a stalker!” the man yelled back.

“...Wait, what?!”

As it turned out, he looked a lot less intimidating with his hat off... so we decided to interrogate him.

“I’m telling you, I’m not a stalker! Nothing of the sort! I’m just a private investigator. I got a request from this one talent agency to do a background check on someone named Nagase Iori-san... Oh, and they had me add ‘Inaba Himeko-san’ at one point, so I investigated you too. To be honest with you, I’m not sure this is standard procedure for a background check! I was just following orders from my client... Man, the word ‘client’ makes me sound pretty darn cool, don’tcha think? This is actually my first job as a private investigator, so I’ve been experimenting with a bunch of different methods. I always wanted to do a stakeout, y’know, like you see on TV!”

The more he talked, the more I started to see the whole picture.

“Long story short, the agency asked me to do a background check on their prospective recruit Nagase Iori-san, then tacked on Inaba Himeko-san as another potential recruit partway through. As a rookie, I figured I could use the practice, so I did a bunch of surveillance stuff for fun!”

“‘For fun’?! *Fuck! Off!* Do you even realize what you’ve put us through, you jackass?! You can go ahead and delete all the intel you gathered on us—and never try to mess with us ever again, or else you can expect to hear from my lawyer! I demand to see your license and business card!”

“Eeeek!”

“Go ahead, Iori. Rip him a new asshole.”

“...I think you’ve got all the bases covered, Inaban.”

And so the stalker crisis came to an end.

"I can't believe it... All the incidents were linked to each other!" Iori laughed on the way home.

"Ugh, what a waste of my time... If only you'd been firm with that stupid talent scout right from the start, none of this would've ever happened!"

I'm so goddamn done with you. Do you know how much emotional labor I put into helping you? How much anxiety this whole thing has given me?

"But... if I can be really selfish for a minute... I'm kinda glad it did."

"Excuse me?" *Are you out of your mind?*

"Well... because we..." Iori faltered, blushing. Naturally, this made me start blushing, too.

Embarrassed, I turned away and looked up at the sky. The moon shone softly down upon us, almost like it was watching over us... *Ugh, this feels so cringey.*

Come to think of it, we'd gotten pretty emotional at each other over the phone earlier. What was I supposed to do, now that she'd seen me at my worst?

"I-Inaban!"

"Y-Yes?!"

She stared firmly into my eyes. Was she going to say something important? Her lips were twitching. I swallowed hard.

"Inaban... I bet you feel kinda gross after all that running around, huh?"

"What? Uh... Yeah, I guess...?"

"And it's gotten pretty late."

"Y-Yeah..."

"And my mom emailed me earlier to tell me she won't be coming home tonight, so... I'm gonna be all alone in my apartment."

Silence.

"So... if you want... and if your family's cool with it... would you wanna... stay over?!"

"...Are you sure you're not coming on to me?"

"No, you dork! Will you get your mind out of the gutter?!"

That night, we talked for hours.

"I have to admit, I don't have much experience with this 'girls' night out' stuff."

"Me either... This is my first time, so go easy on me."

"See, there you go again with your damn innuendos!"

"You are reading WAAAAAY too much into this, Inaban!"

First, we discussed the awkward tension between us the past few days.

"I just... really didn't want to add more problems to your life. That's why I told you not to walk me home anymore."

"You're not adding problems to my life. Hell, even if you were, I'd prefer that to you suffering in silence. But yeah, I admit I was being kind of a bitch. I just... wanted to believe we were... you know... buddies or whatever."

"We are! In my eyes, you're the best buddy I've got... or... at least, I'd like it if you were..."

"But..."

What I was about to say was going to make me sound like a total child, and I was already mortified just thinking about it... but I needed to say it. I was sick of us constantly dancing around it.

"You seem happier when you're with your other friends."

"About that..." The smile vanished from her face. "Listen," she muttered quietly.

I was terrified of what she was about to tell me, but nevertheless, I waited for her to continue.

"This is pretty heavy stuff, so I won't blame you if it makes you uncomfortable, but I want you to know... Growing up, I've been through some... traumatic sorts of experiences."

"You can tell me about it, if you want. I'm all ears."

"Well, okay... uh... So basically, I have five dads..."

And so we talked until dawn.

"...Man, it's already four?"

"Wow... This conversation got pretty deep, huh?"

Even Iori was starting to sound tired.

"We should get some sleep... Oh." Out of the blue, I remembered something.

"What's up?"

I'd wanted this for so long, yet always kept my distance out of fear. But now I wasn't afraid anymore.

"This thing we have going on... Is this what people call 'true friendship'?"

"...I'm not sure."

Yeah, me neither. Then again, perhaps it wasn't a question we

were supposed to ask someone else.

“I guess we have to decide for ourselves, huh?”

It didn’t matter what anyone else thought. How did *we* feel?

“Well then, let’s decide right now!”

In that moment, Iori’s smile shone brighter than the moon.

“As of right now... we’re best friends forever!”

+ + +

“...And that’s how the story ended,” Inaba finished.

As she recounted the tale, Iori listened with her eyes closed, basking in nostalgia.

Inaba was her first real friend. And after that, she’d gone on to make a lot of other friends—almost like Inaba had shown her where she’d been going wrong. Not to mention they’d spent the past year dealing with all those bizarre phenomena, through which Iori was able to reflect on herself as a person. As a result, she slowly stopped putting friendships into rigid boxes.

“S-So, um... what happened to the talent scout?!” Shino asked curiously.

“Well... Inaban went down to the agency with a file folder full of documented evidence of the harassment, and... you get the picture.”

That was the moment she vowed never to get on Inaba’s bad side.

“Oh god, they died?!”

Evidently Shino did not, in fact, get the picture. But Iori decided not to set her straight.

“Is the story really that interesting? I mean, it doesn’t even involve any of you.”

In retelling the tale, they had both danced around the most important emotional element. Not that the antagonists weren’t exciting in their own right, but when it came down to it, that wasn’t the part that mattered.

But then affirmation came from the person Iori least expected:

“Yeah, but I’m still glad you told us,” said *Uwa Chihiro* . “...Wait, why is everyone looking at me like that?”

“Well...” Yui began.

“I mean...” Taichi continued.

“It’s just...” Aoki trailed off.

“Yeahhhh...” Inaba nodded.

They all exchanged knowing looks amongst themselves.

Chihiro scowled. “What’s *that* supposed to mean?”

Whoops! I’d better clue him in. Gotta act like a proper club president for a change!

“Oh, Chee-hee! We’re just all surprised to hear *you* say it, that’s all! So tell me, first-years, did you enjoy it?”

“Oh, yes, very much!”

“Yeah, more or less.”

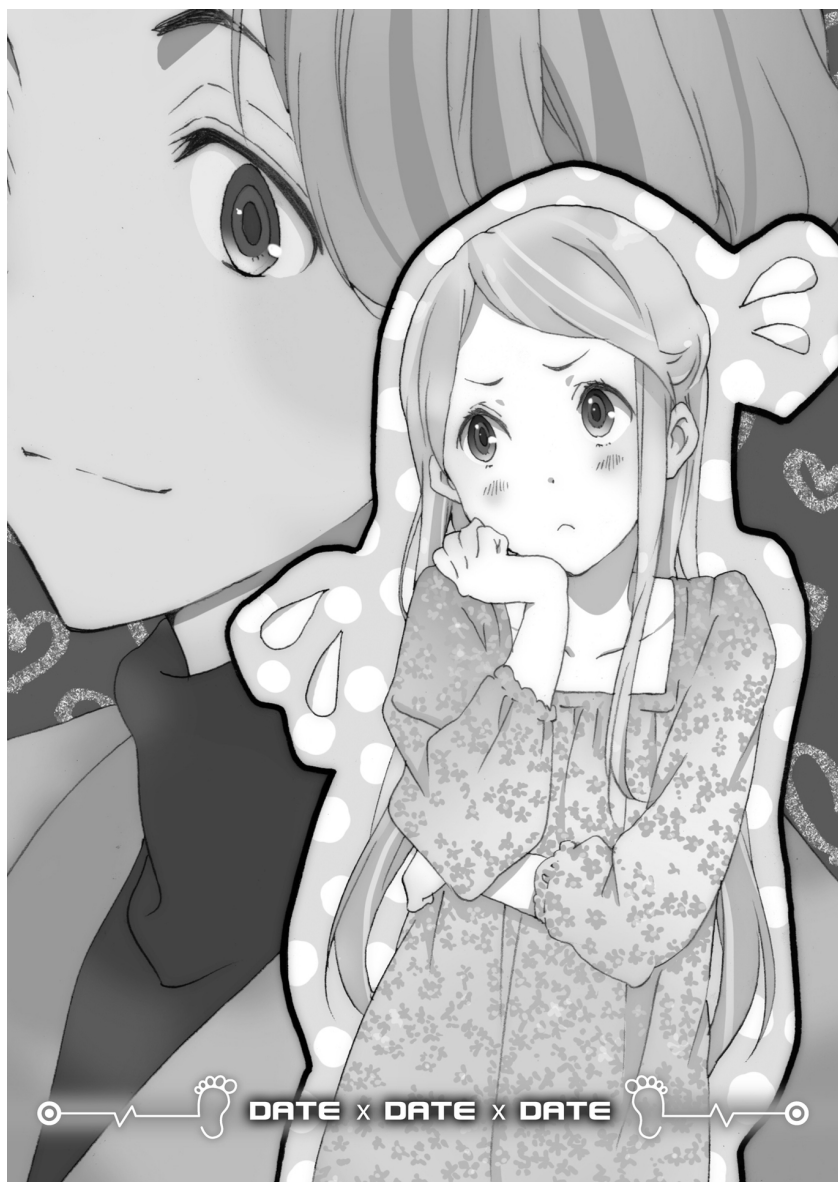
“In that case, how about we spend the rest of the day sharing our favorite CRC memories? That way our younger members can get to know us better!”

Perhaps the senpai-kouhai relationship wasn’t quite the same thing as friendship, but nevertheless, Iori still thought of the first-years as her friends. And in the end, that was all it took to make it real.

Once we’re adults, a one-year age gap won’t matter in the slightest. Forget the social hierarchy! Why restrict yourself to same-age friends when you’ve got a whole school full of cool people? Friendship has no limits!

“Shino-chan! Chee-hee! You may be junior to us, but that doesn’t make you any less important!”

Because you’re our friends... and that’s what matters!



DATE × DATE × DATE

That day found me, Kiriya Yui, agonizing alone in my room, as per usual.

I knew dating wasn't going to be easy. I knew there was more to it than simply agreeing to be someone's girlfriend. There were many, many steps after that—and I needed to start working my way up the staircase. Go on dates, hold hands, link arms, snuggle, hug, kiss...

“Eeeeeeeegh!”

I flailed my limbs, punching and kicking the mattress. Then I grabbed a nearby pillow and buried my face into it.

Was I really going to do all that? Yeah... Sooner or later I was going to have to, step by step. With who, you ask? With my boyfriend—Aoki Yoshifumi.

“EEEEEEEEEGH!”

Flustered, I rolled around on my bed.

“No... I have to do this...”

At last, I was making progress... down a path that had been walled off for as long as I could remember. And if I didn't do the things a girlfriend was supposed to do, then there was no point in being his girlfriend at all. But more than that, I wanted to be normal, like everyone else.

“I mean, we're dating now... so... Eeeeeegh !”

“Sis?”

Instantly, I froze. Then I turned my head in the direction of my bedroom door—slowly and stiffly, like some kind of robot.

“Uh... Dinner's ready,” my younger sister Anzu continued as she peered into my room.

“Oh... C-Cool... I'll be right there,” I nodded.

With that, she turned... but right as I was expecting her to walk off, she stopped short and leaned back over the threshold.

“Just so we're on the same page, um... I'll pretend I didn't see any of that.”

I collapsed face-first back into my pillow. *Gee, thanks, Anzu.*

Three weeks had passed since the biggest event in Yaegashi Taichi's high school career—the school trip to Hokkaido—and its impact was tremendous. He had struggled, but so too had he grown, and now hardly anyone ever came to him for advice anymore.

It was November. Autumn had long since settled in, and winter was still far away... but while the weather was still pleasant for the time being, he knew it wouldn't last. Soon he'd have to bundle himself up in jackets and scarves every time he went outside.

Following the recent "love craze," a plethora of new couples had sprung up like daisies. But Yamaboshi High School had gone back to normal for the most part, and peace reigned in Class 2-B...

"What do you mean, you guys haven't gone on any dates?!" shouted Kurihara Yukina, Yamaboshi track athlete, clutching at her wavy hair in frustration. "I *cannot* believe this!"

With a tall and slim physique, Kurihara had drawn herself up to her fullest height in order to tower over the recipient of her complaint: one Kiriya Yui.

"B-But..." Kiriya mumbled, shrinking herself down even smaller than she usually was. Her long tawny hair had lost a good 20% of its glossy shine.

School had ended for the day, but a few students (Taichi included) had remained in the classroom to chat... and apparently Kiriya had said something to set Kurihara off.

"No buts, missy! You've been official for *three weeks* ! I know you're busy with karate stuff, but you can't tell me you haven't had a single day off since then!"

"Now, now, Yukina-chan! Let's all settle down!" called Nagase Iori, her long, dark, silky hair affording her an almost motherly vibe. Paired with her emotional fortitude, she had grown more beautiful than ever—in Taichi's humble opinion, anyway.

"S-Sorry! Maybe I'm a little touchy. I guess the dry spell is getting to me."

What kind of dry spell is she talking about...? Taichi had the feeling he knew the answer. Awkwardly, he averted his eyes.

"But still, though, it's weird you guys haven't done anything together! I mean, he's your boyfriend! And you're, like, totally adorable! We should be gushing about boys right now, damn it! Ugh, what a waste... You're *wasting your life* , Yui! At the rate you're going, you won't have your first kiss until after we graduate!"

"M-My first kiss...?! Oh, please!" Blushing, Kiriya started to

fidget with her fingers.

“Seriously, you’re *such* a child! Anyone else our age would’ve started smooching their boyfriend by *day two* at the latest!”

“Look, I... I just need some time! If anything, *you* move way too fast!”

“If you ‘need some time’ for one measly kiss, then when the heck are you guys gonna have se—”

“Ooookay, that’s enough!” Nagase declared in a singsong voice as she zipped over and clapped a hand over Kurihara’s mouth.

“Thank god for Nagase,” Taichi muttered under his breath.

“There are still boys around, you know!” Nagase continued. “I mean, look! Taichi’s right there!”

She pulled her hand away, and Kurihara sputtered for breath.

“You’re right... Sorry... But you get where I’m coming from, right?! Yui’s *finally* got a boyfriend, and she hasn’t gone on one single date with him! Here I was, trusting that she could handle her own relationship—but *clearly* I was wrong!”

She turned and glared at Kiriya, who flinched like she was ready to bolt.

“Eeek! Listen, I... I mean, what about *her*?!”

“Huh?!”

Out of nowhere, Kiriya redirected the conversation to Nakayama Mariko, another member of the group. She was a cheerful, chatty girl from the Calligraphy Club who always wore her hair in her trademark high pigtails. One month prior, with some assistance from Taichi and Kiriya, she had started dating Ishikawa from the baseball team.

Their relationship was a secret at first, but over time rumors steadily began to spread... and as more and more people found out about the clandestine love between the taciturn Ishikawa and the bubbly Nakayama, their reactions were almost always the same: *You’re joking, right?*

“Are you going on dates with *your* boyfriend, Nakayama-chan?!”

It was plainly obvious Kiriya was just trying to redirect the focus of the conversation onto someone else. This detail was not lost on Kurihara, who was still fuming.

“This isn’t about her! This is about *you*, Yui!”

“Y-Yeah! This is about *your* relationship... not... not mine...”

“...Uh, Nakayama-chan...?”

“Wh-What is it, my... er... lovely Yukina-chan?”

As it turned out, Nakayama was *terrible* at playing it cool.

“You’ve been dating your boyfriend for a month now, right? Month and a half? You’ve gone on at least one date with him... Oh god, you haven’t?” Kurihara stared, appalled, like she couldn’t begin to comprehend what she was hearing. “What is *wrong* with you people?! Oh my god, this can’t be happening right now!”

“Everyone has their own approach to romance,” Taichi remarked, hoping to defuse the situation.

“Y-Yeah, what Taichi said!”

“Exactly my point, Yaegashi-kun!”

“Cram it! You say that, but I *know* you and Inaba-san must’ve already had se—”

“That’s enough: part two!” Nagase shouted as she clapped a hand back over Kurihara’s mouth.

“Our relationship is *chaste*, thank you very much,” Taichi insisted, feeling ever more grateful for Nagase’s presence.

“Mmmph—gah! *Iori*! Are you trying to tear my mouth off with that vise grip?! Anyways... If you want to have a boyfriend, then you’d better go on some freaking dates with him! Not just for my benefit, but for yours, too!”

“Yeah, I know...” Kiriya mumbled, shoulders slumped.

“But this is my first relationship, so I don’t really know what to do!” Nakayama complained.

Both of them seemed rather apologetic; Kurihara let out a breath. “If anything, I’m ashamed of your boyfriends for not manning up! Seriously, do they *want* some other guy to steal you away? I’m gonna strangle them!”

“Okay, Yukina-chan’s kinda starting to freak me out,” Nagase whispered.

“Something’s really got her panties in a twist,” Taichi retorted under his breath.

When it came to romance, Kurihara could never seem to keep her composure. At this rate, she was going to steal Fujishima’s thunder entirely.

“It’s not Aoki’s fault, Yukina! Really! He’s invited me out a few times, but... I just can’t seem to find the courage to go. I need more time.”

“S-Same here! Ishikawa-kun’s been real busy with baseball practice, but he does try to make time for me! It’s just that whenever we try to go somewhere, it turns out the place is closed,

or under construction, and then we... we just... go... home...?”

“Are you freaking kidding me?! If your boyfriends are actually trying to make this work, then how are you *both* screwing this up?! This is *absolutely unacceptable!* ”

“Uh oh! There she goes again!” Nagase shouted.

Perhaps Kurihara’s deranged obsession with everyone’s love lives actually made her *worse* than Fujishima, in a way...

“...What’s the matter, Taichi? Looking for something?”

“Oh, it’s just... This feels like an opportune time for Fujishima to pop out of nowhere, but... I guess she’s not here, huh?”

Evidently she’d either gone home or to her clubroom. Not like her life revolved around them...

“...So why are you still looking for her...?”

Part of him was sure she’d appear out of thin air right when he let his guard down, but... apparently not? Perhaps there were limits to her powers of omnipresence... *Yeah, that’s probably for the best.*

“Alright, that does it! In two days, on Saturday, you’re both going on a freaking date! And to make sure you don’t worm your way out of it, I’m going to make it a *double* date!”

“I can’t!” Kiriya and Nakayama shouted in unison.

“Why can’t you?! Do you know what the definition of ‘dating’ is?!”

“S-Slow down, Yukina! Our first date can’t be a *double date!* That’s way too complicated!”

“Yeah! She’s right, Yukina-chan! Maybe it wouldn’t be so bad if at least one of us had some experience, but we’re both total noobs! We’ll screw it up somehow!”

Despite their desperate attempts to talk her out of this, Kurihara was clearly dead-set on making this double date happen. *Sucks to be them*, Taichi thought. *Good thing I’m exempt from—*

“Okay then, we’ll make it a triple date with Yaegashi and Inaba-san, too!”

“What? *Why?!* ” Taichi demanded. *I was fine staying on the sidelines, personally!*

“Oh, relax! You two go on dates all the time, don’t you? You’ll hardly even notice a third... fourth... fifth... sixth wheel!”

“What kind of date has a *sixth wheel?!* Look, Inaba and I have a very private relationship. We don’t need an audience!”

“Please! I’m not asking you to do anything kinky... assuming you don’t do that kind of thing already.”

“What? No! We’re as vanilla as you can get!”

“...Just to be sure, can I ask you what these ‘vanilla’ dates are like?”

Taichi narrowed his eyes at Kurihara. Did his relationship with Inaba really give off some kind of deviant vibe?

“For the most part, we just take turns supporting each other’s hobbies. Sometimes she comes with me to watch a pro wrestling match, and other times I go with her to the electronics store. Stuff like that.”

“Does that even count as a date...? I guess maybe it does... Okay, well, do you ever go anywhere a little more special?”

For some reason, Kurihara’s brow was steadily furrowing deeper and deeper.

“I mean, sure... sometimes... Not a lot, mind you... Oh, but we do go to a lot of cafes! Grab a drink, talk, that kind of thing?”

“Ugh, you’re so lazy! You need to try harder!” Frustrated, she pantomimed a table flip, then slumped forward onto her desk.

“You’re all such cute couples... I just want my friends to live their best lives... Wait!” Suddenly, she jumped to her feet. “I see now... I have to do this! It’s my destiny! This triple date is happening, got it?! And I’m going to coordinate the whole thing!”

“Wait, what?! Are you seriously going to make us do this?! I mean... is Aoki going to be cool with this...? Aaaagh...!”

“Master Yukina-chan! Please, I have to confirm with my other half... He has baseball practice, you know... Gaaaah...!”

“You need to calm down, Kurihara... N-Nagase! Can’t you stop her?!” Taichi pleaded. She was their only hope!

Nagase rose to her feet and walked up to Kurihara.

“Yukina-chan... This sounds like a blast! Can I help?!”

“Saw that one coming!”

Nagase was the type to follow her heart, especially when a fun time was involved.

“Alright, everybody! Get in touch with your bae and ask about Saturday! But be warned, if Saturday doesn’t work, we’ll just keep rescheduling until we find a day that does!”

And so, ignoring the pleas of their victims, Kurihara and Nagase decided to orchestrate a triple date with Taichi/Inaba, Kiriya/Aoki, and Nakayama/Ishikawa.

Why this?



Then Saturday rolled around, and by some freak coincidence, no one had any schedule conflicts.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I’m glad you all could make it. Today, my associate and I will be your date instructors!” announced Nagase, wearing a frayed hoodie and jeans, her arms folded.

“If it turns out you’re just screwing with us, I’m gonna kick your ass,” grumbled an openly annoyed Inaba Himeko, standing next to Taichi. Normally, as her boyfriend, it was his duty to calm her down, but today he wasn’t about to try it. If anything, he was pretty sure he deserved a medal for convincing her to show up at all.

Granted, they could have just stayed home, but then he would’ve felt bad for Kiriya and Nakayama.

“This is not a game! If you *dare* question us, you’ll be treated to a lecture by the Queen of Love herself!”

Nagase pointed to the ringleader of the operation, one Kurihara Yukina, who was wearing a white shirt, red knit cap, and short-shorts over leggings. Combined with her height, she could pass for a college student.

“Right you are! This event is designed to introduce you all to the joys of romance! And not in a mean-spirited way, either. We have only the purest of intentions!” Then Kurihara turned to Inaba. “I gotta say, Inaba-san, I’m really loving your outfit! Not too overdone—simplistic, yet sexy!”

“Whoa there, Yukina-chan! Can’t you say ‘sensual’ or something instead? It’s not even noon!”

Kurihara was already going off the rails before the triple date had even started. Fortunately, Nagase was there to rein her in.

Still, she had a point. Inaba’s tight-fitting beige capri pants and white knitted jersey sweater gave her a pristine aesthetic that highlighted her natural beauty for a very sexy... er, sensual... end result.

“Wh-What? I just grabbed whatever was lying around and threw it on.”

“False! You couldn’t possibly achieve this delicate balance purely at random! With an outfit this simplistic, you would’ve had to scour *multiple* different stores to find the perfect fit and silhouette!”

“Nnngh...!”

Inaba had no comeback to this. Meanwhile, Taichi was surprised to learn she'd gone to such great lengths.

With a soft smile, Kurihara walked up and put a hand on Inaba's shoulder.

"Relax. You're doing a great job, Inaba-san. And with a little more knowledge and experience, you'll really shine. Let's have some fun today, okay?"

"...I admit, it couldn't hurt to improve my skills. Here's hoping this triple date proves educational in some way."

Evidently Inaba had chosen to look on the bright side. *Whew*. Then Kurihara jabbed him hard in the side.

"The problem here is *you* !"

"Gah!"

"I haven't heard you say one word to Inaba-san about her outfit!"

"Huh? Oh, uh... I was just waiting for the right time..."

"The 'right time' is the second you lay eyes on her! For your girlfriend's sake, I'm gonna need to put you through the wringer, Yaegashi!"

The look in her eyes was terrifying. Come to think of it, Taichi vaguely recalled one of his track team friends mentioning how Kurihara was "usually pretty chill, except when she gets angry..."

"Now the *real* challenge will be these two couples over here."

Kurihara spun on her heel to face Kiriyama/Aoki and Nakayama/Ishikawa. They were each lined up next to their respective partner, but the gap between them was *slightly* too large, and the tension was palpable.

"Why so stiff, you guys?! You're with the one person you know you can trust more than anyone! Unclench!" Kurihara shouted.

"Trust us, this is going to be a good experience for you," Nagase added. "Once you make it through today, you'll be able to go on all kinds of dates, no problem!"

"Says the girl with zero relationship experience," Taichi retorted under his breath. He knew she'd only tagged along for the hell of it, but it really didn't make sense to have her "instructing" anyone.

"You cool with this, Yui? Me personally, I think we can take it slow."

"I... I'm fine! Going on a big group date with everybody sounds like fun! Once we get started we'll all split off, but we won't be alone together the whole time, so it's the perfect balance!"

“Why are you breathing so hard...?”

“I’m not!”

Kiriyama was wearing a big, poofy flower-print dress, and though it seemed a bit too cutesy at first glance, it enhanced her femininity and youthful innocence to a very huggable degree.

“I don’t care what we end up doin’ as long as I get to be with you.”

“Wh... Where did that come from...?!” Kiriyama blushed.

The two of them seemed to be doing just fine on their own, so Taichi shifted his gaze to the third couple.

“Ishikawa-kun... I’m sorry to drag you into this,” Nakayama mumbled, her high pigtails swaying as she craned her neck up at her very tall boyfriend. She was wearing a gray hoodie over a sky-blue skirt. Casual, yet girly—a perfect fit for her personality. Plus, guys tended to like it when their girlfriends didn’t try too hard.

“Ouch!”

“Quit ogling the other women,” Inaba growled as she pinched Taichi’s love handle. *Life’s tough when you have an observant girlfriend.*

“Don’t be. Whatever works for you is fine by me,” Ishikawa replied calmly. He looked completely unruffled by the situation at hand... but then again, he was always the level-headed type.

“Y-Yeah, me too... If you’re cool with it, then I’m cool with it...”

In contrast, however, Nakayama was acting *far* too reserved compared to her usual self... and yet at the same time, Taichi could sense her restless anxiety. He was starting to worry about her, actually.

“Now then, no sense in standing around! Let’s get started!” Kurihara announced.

“But you haven’t told us what we’re doing yet,” said Kiriyama.

“I’ve got it all mapped out, don’t you worry. Today we’re going to take your relationships to the next level... and on that note, it’s time for an outing to the park!”

At this, Nakayama started to flip out.

“If I may, Yukina-chan—why the park, exactly?! Isn’t that kind of boring?! There’s no wildlife or anything! No movies! No entertainment!”

“Is that what you thought dates were all about, Nakayama-chan? Oh, you sweet summer child. Dates are about spending time one on one, and that means a date can happen wherever you want

it to. Anywhere can be paradise!”

“Slick line, Yukina-chan!” Nagase chimed in supportively. Clearly *she* was having a great time, if no one else.

“Kurihara, are you sure these beginners will be able to handle a park date right out of the gate? Seems a bit too advanced, don’t you think?” Inaba asked.

“You’re not wrong there, Inaba-san. Until they find their groove with each other, they might not know how to handle long periods of sitting around in silence.”

Kuriyama blanched. “That sounds, like, ridiculously hard!”

“And that’s the whole point. I’m trying to assess your current aptitude. I mean, even if you haven’t gone on any dates, you guys still talk to each other, right? So I’m going to observe your comfort levels. Inaba-san and Yaegashi, I’m sure you two will have no trouble with this little test, but I hope you’ll humor me for now.”

“You say that, but I’m no pro myself,” Taichi murmured. He couldn’t remember ever taking Inaba to the park, and now he was starting to feel self-conscious about it.

“I can’t wait to see your beautiful relationships in action!” Nagase exclaimed, single-handedly piling on even more pressure.

“Alright, guys! We’re going to a really nice park, and when we get there, you’ll all pair off. From there, you can walk around, sit on a bench, talk, drink a soda, whatever you prefer. Then, once your time’s up, we’ll all meet back up for the next phase. And don’t worry—Iori and I aren’t going to be breathing down your necks. Now then...”

Kurihara shot a glance at her second-in-command Nagase, who grinned and bellowed:

“GOOOOO!!!”

—Yukina and Iori: Observation Pt. 1—

At last, our plans were set into motion, and the triple date extravaganza began!

I (Kurihara Yukina) pumped my fist in excitement. I’d made sure to act extra bubbly to motivate everyone to have a good time—hopefully it helped.

Truth be told, I’d been on at least one double date in the past, but never a *triple* date. Hence, I had no idea what sorts of problems might occur... and that meant I’d need to supervise them carefully.

Otherwise, someone could get hurt.

“You look pretty tense, Yukina-chan,” Iori commented.

“Damn right I am! One single mistake could ruin an entire relationship!”

At this, her gaze hardened to match my own. “Good point... The smallest detail could have a serious ripple effect.”

“Love is just that powerful,” I nodded. That’s what made it so great, yet scary at the same time. “Let’s stay sharp and keep an eye out for any trouble.”

“You got it, Yukina-chan.”

Together, we started walking—like two soldiers headed for the front lines. Perhaps that was a weird analogy, or perhaps it was rather fitting. *Love is a battlefield*, as they say... and this was one fight we couldn’t afford to lose. I would need to put my whole heart and soul into making this triple date a success.

This rush of excitement I felt—was it in anticipation of the upcoming challenge, or...?

Suddenly, Iori blurted out: “It’s kinda fun to spy on other people’s love lives, huh?”

“You’re not wrong!”

First, we waited around to let the three groups get a sizable head start. Then, finally, it was our turn. Glancing around, we walked through the park.

“Man, look at that big, fancy hedge! It’s got flowers and everything,” Iori remarked.

“Yeah, this park has a lot of places to hide. Hedges, weirdly-shaped trees, you name it. And there’s plenty of people around, too.”

The park paths were well-populated with visitors, possibly due to the sunny weather, but not to a loud and distracting degree.

“It’s so nice and clean and well-maintained... I get that taxpayer money probably covers all their expenses, but at this level of quality, they could totally charge an entry fee if they wanted, y’know?”

“My parents told me the mayor’s a big proponent of—gah, we sound like we’re forty! Anyway, look over there!”

I pointed in the direction of two figures I recognized. We stopped short, then concealed ourselves in the shadow of a nearby tree.

“Ooh, Taichi and Inaban sitting on a bench! Are any of the others around? Hm... Doesn’t look like it.”

Good—no chance of any interruptions. I had them walk in different directions on purpose, after all.

“Alright, let’s try to get a little closer. But not too close—we want to see what they’re like when no one else is looking.”

“Right you are, Yukina-chan! Let’s see... We could sneak along the hedges on the left-hand side... Then we’ll need to dash out of cover and hide behind the rest area.”

“Sounds good. Let’s do it.”

This is actually kind of fun... It feels like we’re in a spy movie or something... No, what am I thinking? This is serious business!

“Don’t look back... Don’t look back... Okay, go!”

On my signal, we both dashed forward in a crouch run. An elderly couple gave us a weird look, but I ignored them. Then we rushed out of cover to the back of the sheltered outdoor rest area. *Success!* I let out a sigh of relief, then looked at Iori; we exchanged a thumbs-up.

Meanwhile, Yaegashi and Inaba were sitting a few meters away on a park bench.

“Yeah, I don’t really know,” Yaegashi was saying.

Fortunately for us, his voice was bouncing off the walls of the rest area, making him perfectly audible. Neither of them had turned around as we approached, either. *Perfect*. I exchanged a look with Iori, and together we crouched down on the spot. *They’ll never find us here.*

Then Inaba spoke.

“This sure is a park, alright... Nice flowers... Nice fountain...”

“Whoa, whoa. You can’t just burn through every topic of conversation all at once! Come on!”

“Look, I don’t know what to tell you. It’s pretty and all, but it’s just a damn park. What deep and meaningful conversation is there to be had?”

“I don’t know... It’s not that different from going to a cafe, if you think about it.”

“Yeah, I know. It’s fine.”

Inaba didn’t sound that enthusiastic. So how would Yaegashi respond, knowing his girlfriend wasn’t having a good time?

“This is gonna be tricky,” I whispered.

“What is?” Iori asked.

"You know, it's weird... At some point, the silence stopped bothering me," Yaegashi commented, and it was clear he wasn't just saying that to be romantic—he honestly felt that way. And that honesty got a reaction out of Inaba.

"What do you mean, the silence?"

"Oh, you know... When we're just sitting here, relaxing, not really talking... because we know we don't have to worry about the other person feeling uncomfortable."

"Yeah, true. In the beginning we were both pretty nervous about boring each other, huh? The silence always felt so terrifying, so I'd try to fill it, and then right as it set in again, suddenly you were holding my hand... and that gave me something different to freak out about." She snickered. "I was such a child back then... but then again, I guess it's only been six months or so."

"True, but it's been a *long* six months, you could say."

"Don't remind me... I've been trying to forget about that asshole and everything he did to us."

At this, Iori flinched. *What's wrong?*

"I hate to admit it, but it feels like we lost one of the best years of our teenage lives to those phe—"

"Okay, stop. Let's not talk about this right now. We're on a date, remember?"

"Right. Speaking of, actually... um... we haven't really gone on many of the more 'classic' dates, have we?"

"They haven't?" I asked Iori.

"What, like, the movies or the aquarium or something? If they've gone, I haven't heard them talk about it at all."

"What about it?" Inaba asked Yaegashi.

"Oh, I dunno. I was just wondering if maybe I could be a better boyfriend—whoa!"

Out of nowhere, Inaba leaned her head against his shoulder; Yaegashi adjusted his weight slightly to the left to support her. With his free hand, he stroked her hair.

"I like our relationship just the way it is," Inaba replied in a soft voice, and I could only imagine the impact it must have had on Yaegashi. "But that said, you *do* have room for improvement in the boyfriend department."

"...I'll try to work on it."

"Mmm... I gotta say, I'm a little worried about Yui and the others."

“Worried they won’t know what to do with the silence?”

“They’ll probably get too nervous and screw it up... but those small failures will help them find their way forward. I just wish they could understand that.”

After that, the two of them started to pack up like they were getting ready to leave, so Iori and I beat a hasty retreat, straying off the path and through the trees. After all, if they caught us eavesdropping, it would have serious repercussions later on.

Arriving at the main park path, we came to a stop. Here we could safely be seen with no complaints. Once we caught our breath, it was time to discuss what we’d overheard.

“Their relationship seems *really* stable, huh, Captain?” Iori asked.

I nodded. We had just witnessed something truly beautiful.

“Yeah... which is great and all, but jeez, they sound like an old married couple! How much romantic strife does it take to get to that level? I’m starting to think *they* should be the instructors here...”

Even *I’d* never had a relationship that solid before. Now I was feeling insecure.

“Pull yourself together, Yukina-chan! If you give up, it’s game over!”

“R-Right... Sure, they may be an old married couple, but... but a healthy amount of puppy love is vital for any long-lasting relationship! That’s what I’ll advise them. They need to be more conscious of their feelings for each other!”

Their relationship seemed a little too limited. Nothing wrong with that, of course, but it couldn’t hurt to show them a few different ways of doing things. That way they could be sure they’d found the style that suited them best.

“Sounds good to me! Believe it or not, our Inaban loves all that girly romance stuff. We’ll make them get so lovey-dovey, it’ll make *us* blush just watching!”

“Hell yeah! Let’s fan the flames of their passion!”

“May their love burn evermore!”

“And then tonight they can have some hot se... Um, Iori? Aren’t you going to stop me again? I was low-key starting to enjoy it.”

“Sorry to say, I do these things for no one but myself! ...You’re kind of kinky, aren’t you?”

Eeek, you're gonna make me blush!

—Yukina and Iori: Observation Pt. 2—

Our next targets: Nakayama and Ishikawa. Following along the path they had taken at the start of the date, we began our search.

After about fifteen minutes of walking, we finally tracked them down. Fortunately, as with our previous targets, they didn't notice us at all. *Maybe this means I'm cut out to be a secret agent or something.*

"This looks like a problem, wouldn't you say, Yukina-chan?"

"I would indeed."

The Nakayama-Ishikawa pair had a glaring height difference, made all the more apparent as they walked along in silence, both of them staring straight ahead without so much as *glancing* at the scenery.

"Are they headed somewhere?" Iori asked me.

"No way. Just look at them."

They were walking so quickly, we couldn't afford to stand around or else we might lose track of them... so we started to tail them.

"Hmmm... Our selection of hiding spots isn't so great over here."

"I don't think we'll need one." *Seriously, these friggin' amateurs!*

We were following right behind them on a perfectly straight path, and yet they somehow didn't notice us. At all. Not that I particularly *wanted* them to, but the fact that they didn't was pretty telling in and of itself.

"Whoa, whoa. We're getting a little too close, don't you think, Yukina-chan?"

"Meh, it's fine. Look at Nakayama-chan, scared out of her wits! It's painful to watch."

"Nngh... Nakayama-chaaaaan... You doing okay? I'm worried about youuuu...!"

"Settle down, Mama Bear," I retorted.

But truth be told, it was *really* starting to tear me up inside. I could only imagine how the two of them must have been feeling at that very moment... *No, no, no! I can't let my empathy get the better of me. I need to focus on my mission!*

"I think Ishikawa's pretty scared, too; he's just not letting it

show. Well, then again, he's always been a man of few words—"

"Oh! I think Ishikawa-kun just said something! Look, they stopped walking!"

"Calm *down*, Iori! And keep your voice down!" *Crap, now I'M shouting!*

Panicked, we both dashed off the paved road and into the foliage. From there, we crept closer to the couple. With anyone else, this sort of approach would be risky, but not so with these two. The only way *they'd* notice us is if we waved a hand in front of their faces.

Ugh, now I have dirt stains on my knees.

"Huhwha?!" Nakayama yelped.

Beside me, Iori buried her face in her hands. "Come on, Nakayama-chan... Pull it together, girl!"

"Oh, I was just wondering... Do you come here often?" Ishikawa asked.

"Oh, uh... good question? Not... really? I don't know?"

"Ah."

Silence. Their conversation had died before they'd even hit the thirty-second mark.

Now how might I describe the experience of watching this unfold as an outside observer? Ah, yes—*my heart was screaming.*

"Nngh... I can't see her face from here, but I can tell from her posture that she's dying of embarrassment...!"

"Don't let it get you down, Nakayama-chan! Just push through! You can do this!" I whispered. Even if she couldn't hear me, I still hoped I could somehow send her a bit of my courage.

Unfortunately, those hopes were in vain, as our targets set off walking once more... in complete silence.

From there, Ishikawa attempted multiple times to start a conversation, but because Nakayama self-destructed every time, none of these attempts lasted longer than sixty seconds. In the end, the only thing that didn't waver was their walking pace... and the more I watched, the more it started to look like they were training for a marathon.

After that, Iori and I decided not to pursue them further.

"Aaaand they're gone... They must have a lot of stamina to do all that walking," Iori commented.

"They're like a textbook example of what *not* to do on a date," I

sighed as I watched them recede into the distance.

Clutching her chest, Iori shook her head. “Ugh... My heart aches for Nakayama-chan... She’s not usually like that! She can do better—she just has to try!”

I could feel Iori’s pain as though it were my own. Unfortunately, this was no time to be wallowing in sympathy. As the showrunners, we needed to keep our act together.

“Nakayama-chan’s at her best when she doesn’t overthink things. But now she’s obsessing over every little detail, and it’s got her stuck in a rut, I guarantee it.”

“Sounds about right. What about Ishikawa-kun?”

“Ishikawa was awkward in his own way, but at least he was trying to start a conversation! The problem is that he’s just not the chatty type. Their relationship will work best if Nakayama-chan does 80% of the talking, so we really need her to start meeting him in the middle. And by that, I mean... just *act normal*, for god’s sake!”

Easier said than done, I know.

“It’s always hardest in the beginning,” Iori mused. “If they could just get past their initial awkwardness, I’m pretty sure it’d be smooth sailing from there.”

Pretty sharp, I thought. Then I realized something:

“You know, Iori, you sound like you’re speaking from experience, but... have you ever actually dated anyone?”

“O-Oh, uh... I’m afraid not, my dear Yukina-chan.”

But you’re the prettiest—second-prettiest?—girl in our grade! What a waste!

“Then it sounds like I’ll need to organize a special lesson plan for you, too. You’re going to get yourself a boyfriend before we graduate, you hear me?”

“Huh? You’re roping *me* into this, too?! Is this karma?!” She slumped to her knees in defeat.

Oh, grow up already!

—Yukina and Iori: Observation Pt. 3—

As for our final targets, their voices carried across half the park, so tracking them down was a cinch. Plus, it meant we could eavesdrop on them without much trouble.

Iori and I crouched down behind a hedge a considerable

distance away, then slowly peered out at the path, where the couple in question were talking.

“Exactly as I expected...”

“What is it, Yukina-chan?”

“Huh? Oh, nothing.”

Kiriyama Yui was one of my closest friends. She was small and cute and innocent, but her love life had remained dormant right up until the end of our second year of high school, and I felt compelled to fuss over her. Call me nosy, but I got the feeling that if I left her to her own devices, she would stumble headfirst into trouble. Looking back, those feelings were probably my main inspiration for this triple date in the first place.

“It’s our first date! We should celebrate! Maybe snap a selfie or somethin’! Now where’s my phone...”

“Will you settle down?! God! You’re acting like a child!”

“Okay, sorry, my bad! I promise I won’t take a bunch of pictures. Just a couple.”

Without batting a lash, Aoki had changed tack to suit Yui’s preferences, and yet Yui remained silent. Knowing her, she was probably lost in thought. She had a fairly... overactive imagination at times.

“Yui?”

“Wh-What do you want?!”

“Oh, I just noticed you’re kinda zoning out. So, uh, what’s with the karate stance?”

“W-Well... It’s just a force of habit! *You’re* the one who started talking to me!”

“Yeah, but... I mean, we’re on a date, aren’t we?”

“Hah! With you? Fat chance!”

“Yui! Look at me! It’s me, Aoki Yoshifumi! Your boyfriend!”

“...Oh, right.”

“You didn’t actually forget, did you?!”

Good grief, just listen to them! They were both way too high-strung. If I had a camera handy, I could probably record a rom-com at this rate.

“Yui’s pretty cute. She’d make a good pet,” Iori mused quietly.

I nodded. “Yeah. She tends to react on instinct, like a small animal.”

Then I glanced back at Yui to find her exhaling deeply. Maybe she realized they were getting off on the wrong foot, and now she

was trying to mentally reset.

“O-Okay. Let’s do this date thing.”

“Relax! You don’t gotta psych yourself up for it. We can just do whatever you feel like doin’!”

“You certainly seem right at home... Is this because you went on a bunch of dates with Nishino Nana-san?”

“Well... I mean... uh...”

“God, don’t get your boxers in a twist. I don’t actually care either way.”

“Okay, well... Yeah, I guess that’s where my experience comes from.”

“Cool. Anyways, what should we do now?”

“Good question. How about we walk around and talk for a while?”

“Okay then. Start talking.”

“...Look, I can’t just talk on command...”

“Why not? Normally you babble all the time without me ever asking!”

Hmm... I’ll give you points for trying to work with each other, but...

“God, they’re so awkward,” I muttered.

Seriously, I wish I could take a picture and put it in the dictionary under “cringe.”

“Okay, okay! I’ll talk! Let’s see... What should I talk about? Any requests?”

“If anything, I’d like it better if you were quiet!”

“Oh, c’mon! At least pretend to care about me!”

“Hmmm... This isn’t really what I thought our first date would be like... I always thought once I got a boyfriend, everything would start to feel all magical and stuff...”

“You’re a real dreamer, huh, Yui? You’re always talking about fairytale romance.”

“What, so my standards are too unrealistic? Is that what you’re saying?!”

“No, no! I’m saying it’s cute! You know, in a... little-girl sort of way!”

“Oh my GOD, don’t treat me like a child! I’m your GIRLFRIEND, okay?! ...Ugh, you made me say that on purpose, didn’t you?!”

“Nope, that was all you!”

And so, as our observation came to an end, Iori and I plopped

ourselves down on a park bench to take a break and discuss what we'd witnessed.

"Man, they really haven't changed *at all*, have they? Are we sure they're actually dating?" Iori asked.

"I didn't realize Yui was so bad at being girly... I mean, she loves all things cute, and she knows how to dress cute, so why can't she act cute with her own boyfriend?"

I was hoping they bickered a bit less in private, but evidently not.

"Maybe they've just been friends for so long that they don't know how to act any differently."

"That would explain why they're having trouble... Normally there's nothing wrong with a slow transition from friends to lovers, but in Yui's case, I think she has some overblown ideas about what romance is actually like."

"Yeahhhh... Yui's always been the kind of girl who wants a knight in shining armor... but I like that about her, to be honest."

Glad to see Iori gets it. "That's exactly why I want to make sure she doesn't get hurt."

"So I guess we'll need Mr. Boyfriend to man up, huh? Problem is, Aoki's all talk. When push really comes to shove, he just pees his pants... I mean, not *literally*, obviously!"

"Oh, thank god. I was about to say!"

No offense, but I would *not* let Yui date some guy who pees his pants!

"To be honest, I think he's doing alright in the boyfriend department. He's really patient, and he always puts her needs first."

Honestly, his dedication had long since earned my respect.

"But I can't deny that his class-clown schtick brings out the worst in her."

"Hmmm," Iori murmured pensively to herself.

"It kinda feels like he's going out of his way to coddle her today... I wish I could do something to help them hit their stride. I really want their relationship to work out."

But my mind was a blank, so instead I glanced around. There, I spotted what looked to be a college-aged couple having a picnic. Meanwhile, here I was, sitting on a bench with another girl beneath the clear blue sky, worrying about my friends' love lives.

"...Now that I think about it, you're the 'mom friend' of the CRC, aren't you, Iori?"

“Speak for yourself! *You’re* the one fretting over Yui and everyone else!”

Just then, a preschool-aged little boy walked by, hand in hand with (who I assumed to be) his mother. He was screaming with delight; she was wearing an exasperated smile. It was a heartwarming sight, to say the least.

“I wish I had a boyfriend,” Iori said after a moment.

“God, same,” I agreed.

We exchanged a look... then let out a big sigh.

Enough! Forget it! Today’s not about me—it’s about my friends and their partners having a good time. And I’m gonna do whatever I can to make that happen, even if they hate me for it...

But come tomorrow morning, I’ll start looking for my OWN romance!

—Taichi and Inaba: Date Pt. 1—

After their park date, Taichi and Inaba headed back to the meetup spot. Once everyone had reunited, Kurihara gave her next order:

“It’s almost noon, so let’s head to our next destination. By the time we get there, it’ll be the perfect time to have lunch.”

“*Lunch!*” exclaimed Nagase, Kiriya, and Nakayama in perfect unison.

And so the eight of them started walking, chatting amongst themselves. Eventually, Kurihara led them to the entrance of a large shopping mall, home to a major department store and some other clothing retailers. With a variety of restaurants nearby, it was the perfect choice for a date.

Most striking of all, however, was the large, prominent ferris wheel built into the fifth floor of the six-story building. Each night, they would turn on all the multi-colored lights, turning the ordinary attraction into a breathtaking sight to behold.

“It’s been a while since the last time we were here,” Taichi commented quietly, craning his neck up at the building. The ferris wheel was framed on all sides by the clear blue sky; he could only imagine how freeing it would feel to go for a ride on it right now.

As he thought about it, his stomach rumbled slightly. First things first, it was time for lunch.

Together, all eight of them traveled to the food court, where

more than ten different restaurants awaited them.

“Alright, guys! From here on, we’re pairing off again for a fun little meal date! Iori and I will come by and check on you a little later, so be sure to email me once you’ve picked a place to eat,” Kurihara explained.

And so lunchtime began in earnest.

“Wh-Where should we go, Ishikawa-kun?” Nakayama asked.

“Anywhere’s fine with me. Are you craving anything in particular?”

“O-Oh, um... I could go for a beef bowl!”

“Sounds good to m—”

“HOLD IT!” Kurihara interrupted loudly, pointing her finger at Nakayama. *What’s her problem?*

“Wh-What’s wrong, Yukina-chan?”

“Nakayama-chan! What kind of girl wants to eat *beef bowls* with her boyfriend?!”

“Wh... What’s wrong with that?!”

“You’re on a DATE! Your FIRST DATE with your BOYFRIEND! In what world would *a girl* suggest *beef bowls*?! TRY AGAIN!”

“H-Help me! Yukina-chan’s scaring me...!”

“Look, Kurihara, if it’s what Nakayama wants... N-Never mind,” Ishikawa muttered, wilting under the pressure of Kurihara’s fierce glare despite being twice her size.

“Okay, where should *we* go...?”

“Feel free to choose whichever one you want, Yui! I don’t mind! I’ll eat whatever you want to eat!”

Like Ishikawa, Aoki was content to let his girlfriend make the call. Taichi wasn’t sure it was all that honorable to foist that burden onto the girls, but it wasn’t his place to say anything.

“Hmmm... Pasta... Omurice... Tonkatsu... Hmm? Ooh, this place is doing a limited-time special for extra-large sides of rice! That’s a great deal! We should—”

“HOLD IT!” Kurihara roared for the second time.

“Wh-What?”

“Why would *a girl* get excited about a little extra rice?! What are you, Japanese or something?!”

“We’re *all* Japanese, genius,” Taichi retorted under his breath.

“B-But... I had an early breakfast, so I’m starving...”

“I mean, if it’s what Yui wants,” Aoki offered helpfully.

“When you’re on a date, you *always* eat less than you

boyfriend! That's the rule! I'll take you out for all-you-can-eat barbecue next week, but for today, you're gonna have to suck it up! Only pig out when you're with your girls!"

"Yukina-chan really cares about keeping up appearances, doesn't she? So why is she admitting all this right in front of the guys...?" Nagase wondered aloud to herself.

"I can't eat when I'm with my boyfriend...? Maybe I shouldn't date guys after all..."

"Fight it, Yui! Fight your hunger for rice! Do it for me!"

Meanwhile, Nakayama was still at an utter loss.

"If... If I can't have beef bowls, then what *can* I have...? Barbecue...? No, that'll just make her madder...!"

As for Inaba, she stared dismally at everyone else.

"This is completely asinine. Taichi, let's go to that one."

"Sure."

They decided so quickly, Kurihara didn't even get the opportunity to shout at them... but deep down, Taichi had a feeling she'd get her revenge in the end.

Once they were seated, Taichi ordered the Salisbury steak, and Inaba ordered the spaghetti napolitan. They chatted idly while they waited, and before long, their food arrived. They pressed their hands together, said a quick *itadakimasu*, and tucked in.

"Yeah, I definitely made the right call. The quality and portion size are a total steal for the price."

"Oh, Inaba. Only you would choose a restaurant based on the price of the food."

Together, they ate and talked at leisure.

"You know what I think? The potato is the world's most efficient food. It's cheap, and you can prepare it in all sorts of ways, all of which are delicious."

"Yeah, but I'd say french fries are probably—"

Taichi heard two perfectly synched voices on his right:

"BORING!"

It was—you guessed it—Kurihara Yukina and Nagase Iori.

"Why are you guys over here talking about the cost performance of potatoes?! I mean, it's not the worst thing ever, but you sound like you're 80!" Kurihara exclaimed. Then she hailed the waitress. "I'll take an iced coffee, thanks."

"Make that two!" Nagase added. "Man, you guys really are an

old married couple, aren'tcha?"

"Is this your plan? To gatecrash all the dates? Well, whatever. What's wrong with being an 'old married couple,' anyway? Isn't that the end goal?" Inaba asked.

"Whoa... I thought I could get her to switch into Ina-bashful Mode, but apparently not! Inaban, you're getting too comfortable. Your relationship's growing stale!"

"Don't be absurd. This is what peak performance looks like. Isn't that right, Taichi?"

"How should I know? But yeah, I mean, I think things are fine just the way they are."

"Yeah, I'd say you've fostered a healthy relationship," declared the great Kurihara-sensei.

"Then what's the problem?"

"The only thing you need to worry about is routine. Once something becomes routine, it's *really* easy to get bored."

"Routine...?"

"Bored...?"

On second thought, maybe she had a point.

"Yeah. Just don't forget to trot out Ina-bashful Mode every now and then and you should be fine," Nagase nodded.

"Don't worry, she does! But now that you mention it... I guess it *has* gotten a bit more infrequent lately."

"T-Taichi!" Inaba's watery voice grazed his ears. "Are you saying you'll get bored of me if I don't do my bashful schtick?! Is that it?!" she wailed.

"Of course not, silly. Relax."

"But—but if acting bashful strokes your ego, then maybe I should do it more openly!"

"What? It doesn't *stroke my ego*! Can we maybe not treat your affection like it's something you need to regulate?!"

"There we go! Now that's the Ina-bashful we all know and love! Keep it up!" Nagase cheered. Personally, Taichi would've liked her to mind her own business a little more.

"Now then, Yaegashi, don't you have something to say?" Kurihara demanded.

Okay, seriously, is she turning into Fujishima or what?

"I-Inaba..."

"Y-Yes?" Inaba replied, looking back at him like a puppy who heard her owner calling.

"It doesn't matter how sappy you act with me. I'll always love you regardless."

"Right... Thanks. I love you, too. Hee hee." She blushed and hung her head shyly.

"INA-BASHFUL MODE ACTIVATE!" Nagase shouted.

But a split-second later, Inaba was back to acting as though none of it had ever happened. "There's your obligatory lovey-dovey content. See? Totally stroked your ego, didn't it?"

"You were *acting*?!" Nagase retorted before Taichi could.

"To be clear, that did *not* stroke my ego... At least, I don't think it did," he added belatedly. "For the record, though, were you *really* just acting? Because I feel like you're just trying to pretend you were."

"Hmmm," Kurihara mused pensively. "Well spotted, Yaegashi. Now why would Inaba-san want to frame it that way?"

"Because... she's embarrassed...?" Perhaps that was tactless of him; he glanced over at Inaba for confirmation.

Surprisingly, instead of snapping at him for "putting words in her mouth" or some such, she simply stared down at her hands in silence. Then, after a moment, her face flushed beet red, all at once.

"D-Dumbass! How else am I supposed to get away with it?!"

Wait... So I was right?

"If I didn't bury it in a few layers of irony, I... I'd die of humiliation! That's it—Ina-bashful Mode has been disabled! Sucks to be you!"

"You can disable it?" Nagase asked.

"Sure. It's only a fraction of my personality, you know. I can control it entirely at will. And now I'm never going to be lovey-dovey with him ever again."

"Whoa, whoa! Leave the peanut gallery out of this!"

"Don't worry, Taichi, I'm still in love with you and all that. I just won't be cute with you anymore... Wait, but what will that look like? What is 'lovey-dovey,' when you get right down to it? How does it differ from plain old being nice to someone...?"

Suddenly the conversation had veered into semantics.

"If I disable Ina-bashful Mode, how will I show affection to my boyfriend...? How will our relationship even function...?!"

She was starting to panic.

"Relax, Inaba. You're overthinking it."

"Taichi! Don't you think maybe you're too distant with me?!"

Come to think of it, I've never seen you get bashful at all! How do you express your love for me?! Where am I supposed to look for it?!"

"Come on, don't ask me those kinds of questions. You know I won't find an answer right away, and then we'll *both* start freaking out!"

Am I too distant with her? How DO I express my love, anyway? Am I screwing up our relationship?

"Crap... Now you've got me paranoid..."

Suddenly the spotlight was focused on a bunch of minor details he never questioned before, and he was forced to evaluate his past behavior. He knew he needed to find answers to these questions, but he also knew there was no one "correct" answer for any of them, and so he found himself conflicted...

"Wait, why am I letting this get to me?!"

Meanwhile, Nagase and Kurihara talked amongst themselves:

"They're starting to panic. Should we do something, Yukina-chan?"

"They're panicking for a good reason... probably. Real talk, their relationship was getting too stable anyways. These two need a little drama to spice things up every now and then! They can handle it!"

"You sure about that...?"

And so the two troublemakers came in like a wrecking ball, did their damage, and beat a hasty retreat.

After each couple had eaten their Kurihara-sanctioned meals of pasta or omurice or whatever, they all met back up in the food court.

"Haah..."

After the nightmare their two "instructors" had foisted upon them, Taichi was exhausted. And if he couldn't even relax during lunchtime, he had a feeling he was in for one hell of a day.

"Next, we'll all be doing some window shopping! Or regular shopping, if you see something you want to buy. Otherwise, feel free to just browse! I'll be wandering around nearby, so if I see you, I might step in to help out."

As Kurihara grinned, Kiriya and Nakayama shuddered in perfect sync.



"Today, I want you all to keep in mind that you're on a date, okay?"

"Try to envision yourselves as a normal, loving couple! Just... don't go overboard like Taichi and Inaban!"

And so, following that frankly offensive remark, Taichi and Inaba (and the others) were sent on their merry way.

"Be normal" was possibly some of the worst advice he'd ever received. It made it impossible to just be himself. That said, he at least had an idea of how to spice up their usual routine... *Yeah, let's stay optimistic about this.*

"So... shall we hold hands?" he asked.

"Uh... Certainly."

"Why so formal...?"

"You started it!"

"Rrgh..."

Holding hands wasn't something they always did on their dates, and if he thought too hard about it, he'd always start to feel embarrassed.

Nevertheless, he gently took Inaba's small, soft, slightly sweaty hand in his and held it firmly—not too tightly, but not too gingerly, either. Just enough so he could feel her pulse. Then she gripped him back, and he adjusted slightly. *Is this good? Maybe a little less tight?* When he focused on what he was doing, suddenly it didn't come as naturally anymore.

"Why are you wriggling your hand around like that?" Inaba demanded, her tone a mix of annoyance and embarrassment.

"I'm just not sure how tight to hold it..."

"Just do it normally! You know, like that couple over there!" She jerked her head to the right, and Taichi glanced in the direction she indicated.

"Oh, you! Hahaha!"

"Hee hee! Stop it, silly!"

This couple was, in Taichi's estimation, the *textbook definition* of lovey-dovey. He couldn't bear to look at them, so instead he looked at the floor. His hands felt excessively sweaty now. Sure, they looked happy—he couldn't deny that—but he just wasn't comfortable with that level of affection, personally speaking.

He glanced over at Inaba to find her watching the other couple like a hawk.

"Inaba?"

“...Oh, sorry. It’s nothing.”

Her pace quickened as she moved closer, as if to give the lovebirds a wide berth. *What’s gotten into her?* She seemed weirdly conscious of their presence. Did she find them weird, or... did she secretly wish her relationship was like that? Truth be told, Taichi knew he should just ask her outright, but he got the feeling he’d missed his chance to do so.

There were so many different kinds of romantic relationships. What kind did Inaba want to have? What kind did *he* want to foster? What was the right answer?

“A normal, loving couple,” Inaba murmured to herself in contemplation.

As for Taichi, he wasn’t really sure what to say.

“Rrrgh! Goddamn it! How the fuck are we supposed to ‘act normal’?!”

“You could start by swearing less, maybe?”

“Not happening!”

The more they focused on *breaking routine* and *being more normal*, the more irritated Inaba became. Fortunately, as they went around from store to store, her mood steadily improved over time.

On one hand, neither of them were of the impulse-buying persuasion, so this whole “window shopping” assignment felt kind of stupid—but on the other hand, it was still fun to walk around and compare the different storefronts.

“I actually sort of liked that store. Maybe I’ll stop by again next time I have some money,” Inaba mused. By this point, her annoyance had faded completely, replaced instead by a thirst for adventure. “Alright, let’s check this one next. The perfect place for couples, am I right?”

She pointed to a nearby jewelry store. The prices weren’t outrageous, per se, but... well, it was still jewelry. Certainly nothing a teenager could easily afford. And until today, Taichi had never set foot inside one.

“Are you sure we should? Not like we’re going to buy anything... Don’t you think we’ll be out of our depth in there?”

“Think of it this way: we’re not *window shopping*, we’re just *planning ahead*. Every mission needs a little recon, right? And if we can conquer this battle, then we’ll be the coolest couple at school. Let’s go.”

“It *does* seem like a worthwhile experience—hey! Slow down!”

Nevertheless, Inaba strode briskly right into the store. She often claimed to be a coward, but she could be downright fearless when she put her mind to it. Taichi followed after her.

The store interior was uniformly beige in color, its surfaces polished thoroughly to create a pristine outward image. Somehow it felt vastly inappropriate to come in here wearing a T-shirt and jeans.

“Welcome!” said the well-dressed female saleswoman.

Dozens upon dozens of tiny gems gleamed in the light. This was the sort of sparkle no human hands could ever attempt to reproduce, which explained why they were seen as such a significant gift. Ideally he hoped to get something like this for Inaba one day, but...

He knew it was rude to check the price tags openly, so instead he glanced at them briefly as they went. One—two—three—four zeroes. A hefty sum, to be sure.

“Are you looking for anything in particular?” the saleswoman asked, approaching them. Evidently, the employees here didn’t waste any time.

“Well, uh...” he faltered.

He could feel himself start to panic. After all, he couldn’t very well tell her they were just browsing for fun, but if he tried to lie about what they were “looking for,” he had the feeling it would come back to bite him in the end...

Thankfully, Inaba promptly came to his rescue. “I wanted to take a look at your rings for sale.”

“Oh, perhaps a matching set? Certainly! Anything specific you have in mind?”

“Uhhh...” This time it was Inaba’s turn to hit a brick wall. She looked to him.

“Do you have any, um, recommendations, or... bestsellers, or something?” Taichi stammered.

“Maybe on the lower end of the price scale?” Inaba added helpfully.

“In that case, you’ll probably want to look at these. The designs are simplistic, but they go great with any style...”

The employee launched into her sales pitch, explaining the rings’ popularity, alloy composition, and market value. The price was... not entirely infeasible, but still more than Taichi happened to

have on hand that day.

“Do you actually want to buy these?” Taichi whispered.

“Don’t be stupid. I wouldn’t buy something like this on impulse. Let’s just wait around for a while before we leave.”

“But how long is ‘a while?’”

“I don’t know, okay?! Just... do whatever!”

“Anything I can help you with?”

“N-No, no. Don’t mind us!”

“It’s her job to ‘mind us,’ genius!” She lightly kicked the back of Taichi’s knee.

At the same time, Taichi heard another customer giggle somewhere behind him. Of course, it was entirely possible they were laughing at something else, but... he had the sneaking suspicion they were laughing at him and Inaba.

“Would you like to try them on? What are your sizes?”

“Our...”

“...sizes?”

The two of them stared blankly back at her.

“Your ring sizes, I mean. If you don’t know off the top of your head, I can always measure you, if you like.”

“Oh, uhh... Yes please,” Inaba nodded. For once, she seemed a bit thrown off to have encountered a gap in her knowledge.

“Heehee! So cute!” said a voice behind them.

“Warms my heart,” said another.

This time Taichi was *sure* they were talking about him and Inaba, so he turned. There stood a beautiful woman on the arm of a handsome man—both in their mid-twenties, and both so impeccably dressed, Taichi half-wondered if they’d walked in from a magazine photo shoot. The woman was wearing a cardigan over a modest dress, and the man was rocking a visibly expensive three-piece suit. Perhaps it was an odd observation, but... to Taichi, they both seemed to *match* their clothes. Everything about them screamed *grown adult couple*.

When she noticed Taichi’s gaze, the woman grinned. “Hang in there, little boyfriend.”

His heart skipped a beat.

“I miss those days, back when I was sweet and innocent like you!” she continued with a dreamy sigh.

“Now, now. Don’t tease him too much,” the man laughed.

“Sorry about her,” he added to Taichi.

“It... It’s fine,” Taichi replied weakly.

Then the twenty-somethings wandered off to a different sales clerk and asked for something he couldn’t quite hear. The clerk opened a nearby jewelry case and took out a few different items. It was like a scene out of a movie, or maybe a how-to guide for how to act in a jewelry store.

Compared to this other couple, he and Inaba were decidedly lacking in etiquette. All of a sudden, he felt rather ashamed to be standing there at all. His body felt like it was on fire. *Oh god, what if I start sweating?* He wanted to bolt, but he couldn’t. Not with his girlfriend standing right there. He needed to put her needs first and

“It’s our first time in a jewelry store, so we appreciate the help,” Inaba said firmly.

Actually, no—her voice wasn’t really that firm at all. He could hear it wavering ever so slightly. That was how he knew she was trying to hide her fear and embarrassment.

Here in this store, no one but him could possibly understand her feelings. That was fine, of course. Everyone else could go ahead and take her words at face value. *There’s a first time for everything*, as they say.

Perhaps an outside observer would question why Taichi was taking her comment so seriously, but to him—to them—it was something special. Just like their relationship.

“Could you measure me, too?” Taichi asked. Then, with all the bravery he could muster, he added: “Also, could we take a look at these rings over here? I think they’d look really cute on her.”

Maybe for now it was still too early, but... sometime in the future, he *definitely* wanted to get her one.

—Nakayama and Ishikawa: Date Pt. 1—

Thinking back over the course of the day’s events makes me, Nakayama Mariko, want to scream internally.

Obviously I’m excited to go on my first date with Ishikawa-kun! Totally! But I kinda wanted to wait until I was confident that I could act like a real girlfriend, y’know? Because there’s a lot of pressure that comes with that package.

I’ve got no problems with casually chatting with him before or after class, since it’s not much different from any other friendship.

It's fun! But meeting up outside of school means the spotlight is focused entirely on the "romance" part of our relationship, so he'll get a look at the kind of girlfriend I am. And *that* means I can't afford to screw up, or else he'll change his mind about me!

Still, I knew I couldn't keep putting it off forever. So when Yukina-chan organized this triple date, I decided to keep my chin up and look at it as a valuable opportunity. I told myself I would try really, really hard to seem like a cool girlfriend!

Unfortunately, this is easier said than done. In the heat of the moment, my brain keeps drawing a blank, and I end up spiraling into panic mode. At the park, I couldn't act like my usual goofy self, and instead I clammed up completely! Then at lunch, I failed to pick something girly! The whole day's been one screw-up after another, and now I've proved myself to be a totally undateable hot mess. Mariko the Mess.

I've failed to even act *normal*, much less make myself look cool and desirable. Now I hate my own guts. Why am I so stiff and awkward?! At the rate I'm going, I won't ever—Gah! Stop! No negativity, remember? Don't throw in the towel yet! It ain't over till it's over, Mariko! There's gotta be some way I can make a comeback!

I'm just going to have to find a way to show off during our window shopping... Something that'll make him fall even harder for me... Something that'll prove my worth as a cool girlfriend! I'm gonna make him desperate for me, baby! Oh, gosh, that sounds kinky...

"Nakayama? Are you listening?"

"...Huh?! Oh! Yes! How can I help you?"

"Why do you sound like a telephone operator...?"

Hah! Nice one, I think to myself, before realizing a moment too late that I should've just said it out loud. Man, what's gotten into me today? Normally I *never* think before I speak!

"We've already checked all the stores that interest me, so I was thinking it's your turn to choose," Ishikawa-kun continues.

Alright, it's time to show off my good taste! If the stuff I like is cool, then it'll reflect positively on me, and in turn, it'll make ME cool! No more Mariko the Mess!

"Maybe a clothing boutique for starters?"

Limiting my options, eh? Actually, now that I think about it, this place is chock full of clothing stores, so maybe it's the obvious

choice.

To be honest, I don't really care that much about clothes; I'll wear anything as long as it fits me. Well, okay, maybe not *anything*—I can at least tell when something is *blatantly* tacky—but it's not like I go on some big hunt for specific brands or whatever. A lot of places sell reasonably cute clothes these days, so I just go with what's most convenient.

But I'm not about to tell *him* that, of course! Right now, my goal is to look at some cool, fashionable clothes... Come to think of it, I forgot to wear something special for today! Oh well. Too late now.

I don't really know what the hottest brands are, but that's okay, 'cuz my friends gave me a crash course in fashion last night! See, I had a feeling clothes were gonna come into play at some point, and I was right! I'm a genius!

"Ooh, can we go in here? They carry one of my favorite brands," I declare confidently, and together we walk inside.

Look at me, shopping for clothes with a boy! I'm so excited! (Not in a pervy way or anything!)

"Interesting. So this is the sort of street fashion you prefer?" Ishikawa asks, mildly surprised.

But his surprise is fairly understandable, since the store is full of lacey, frilly, poofy stuff. You know, like fairies... or angels... or curtains, really... There's a world of difference between this stuff and the hoodie I'm wearing right now. Fortunately it's at least *kind* of plausible since I'm wearing a skirt today.

"Y-Yeah! I like to dress up real girly on the weekends!"

"But not today?"

"Oh, well, today I thought I'd wear something more casual for our date... Not that I put zero effort into my appearance or anything! I went all-out! I mean, uh, psych! This is just my usual style!"

Ugh, I'm just digging one hole after another. The floor's gotta look like Swiss cheese at this point.

"Truth be told... I couldn't get to sleep last night... you know... because I was so excited." He turns away like he's embarrassed, and this catches me off-guard, since he's usually super stoic. I never expected he would let himself be vulnerable around anyone...

Then he looks at me, and I realize he's waiting for my reaction.

"O-Oh, totally! Yeah, I was really nervous myself!"

I go on to explain how I'd double-checked the contents of my

purse, like, four or five times that morning.

“Haha! You’re more of a worrywart than you let on, aren’t you?”

“Hey, c’mon! Nobody’s ever 100% happy-go-lucky, y’know! But yeah, I get that a lot.”

For once, we’re actually having a halfway decent conversation. I should probably try to figure out what makes this one different from all the others, but I can’t really tell. Anyway, back to business.

“Ooh, is this new? I like it!” I announce, grabbing an item off the rack at random.

It’s a frilly white dress—the kind of thing only a true girly-girl could pull off. If someone like me tried to wear it, I’d end up looking like a big white cotton ball. Sad, but true.

“How much is it? 15,000 yen?! Holy—I mean, uh...!”

Fortunately, I stop myself just in time. Instead, I play it cool and say, “Yeah, I had a feeling it’d be somewhere in that ballpark.”

Hopefully it was convincing...

“Are you the type to spend a lot of money on clothes? I wish I could get it for you, but I’m afraid I don’t have that much to spare.”

“No, no, no! No need! I’m not that bougie! I wait for them to go on sale before I buy them, obviously!” I recite, quoting something one of my friends told me last night.

“Ah, I see. So you look at the new stock ahead of time to get an idea of what to look for during a sale.”

“Ooh, that’s pretty smart...”

“Is that not your current strategy?”

“No, yeah, totally! I mean, like, ‘Pretty smart, *isn’t it?*’ You know?”

“Welcome! Cute dress, don’t you think?”

Oh crap, now the sales clerk’s here to hassle us! I’m so bad at talking to them! Nervous, I look at Ishikawa-kun... but the look on his face suggests he expects me to know how to handle the situation. Right, because I “shop here all the time.” Of course.

“Would you like to try it on?”

Oh god, here we go.

Whenever I get cornered into trying something on, I never have the courage to tell them if I didn’t like it, so I end up buying it anyway. That’s why I avoid stores with aggressive salespeople. As a result, I have next to no experience in declining their suggestions... Ruh-roh, gang! Mariko’s in a jam!

Naturally, I end up cornered into trying it on. My “can’t say no” powers are off the charts over here.

“...D-Do you think I should?” I ask.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, I don’t have the money for it...”

“Aren’t you just trying it on?”

“R-Right... I don’t have to buy it... I can say no... They don’t charge you a try-on fee, do they...?”

“I’ve never heard of anything like that.”

Yeah, that was a dumb question. Apparently my anxiety’s going straight to my brain.

“Right this way!”

“You’ll come with me, right, Ishikawa-kun?!”

“S-Sure...”

The clerk leads us to the changing rooms, then hands me my frilly white girly-girl dress. Man, it’s been a long time since I wore one of these... I know how to put one on, obviously, but what do I do if I’m just trying it on temporarily? Do I take my clothes off, or should I leave my shirt on underneath? What about my socks?

“Would you like to try this on with it? It’s my favorite new trend.”

“Huh? Oh, uh, sure!”

I take it. It’s a big piece of fabric with lots of cutwork frills; I unfold it to find it’s in the shape of a triangle.

“...What is this, some kind of giant doily?”

“Pfft —sorry! It’s a shawl, sweetie!”

OH GOD SHE LAUGHED AT ME AAAAHHHHH

“Oh, right! One of those! I see now!”

You’re supposed to sort of... wrap it around your neck and shoulders, right? Yeah, I’ve heard of them... Not that I know how to wear one, though... And I’m pretty sure you have to wrap it in a certain way... Oh god, what do I do? I’m too embarrassed to ask her how to do it, but I know for a fact I can’t do it on my own! Do I tell her I don’t like it? No way! I can’t do that! I’d feel like a jerk! And I already feel guilty that this poor shawl got stuck with a fashion failure like me!

“Aren’t you going to try it on?” Ishikawa-kun asks.

“W-Will you come with me?!”

“What? Whoa, whoa. I don’t think that would be appropriate.”

“I... I can’t put this on all by myself!”

"I'm sorry, but male customers are not allowed in the women's changing room."

"Right! Of course not! Sorry! Nngh...!"

"You know, Nakayama... It seems to me that perhaps you're not very well-versed in these types of—"

"What are you talking about?! That's crazy talk! Hahaha! We should get some coffee! That'll calm you down!"

Red alert! Abort mission! Evacuate to safety! I don't care anymore—I may be a hot mess, but I'm getting outta here!

I know it shouldn't be this hard for me, but... all this fashion stuff is just too overwhelming. Ugh, I wish I was a girly girl... Maybe then I could survive in situations like these!

—Kiriyama and Aoki: Date Pt. 1—

I didn't think I'd say this, but... I, Kiriyama Yui, am having the time of my life!

"This is soooo cute!"

"Isn't it? How do you feel about the white?"

"Ooooh, the white one's really cute too... Tempting... No, I gotta go with pink!"

"Are you ready to complete your purchase?"

"Actually, I want to shop around a bit more before I commit."

"No problem. Shall I hold these for you at the register?"

"Would you? That'd be great! I'll be back in a bit!"

"See you soon."

God, that pink accessory case is so adorable! I burn the memory into my brain. They *really* knocked it out of the park with that one.

"Yui-saaaaan! Are you done yet?"

And that sales clerk was really nice, too! Clearly this store deserves my money.

"Uh, hello? Earth to Yui-saaaaan?"

That said, my funds are limited... I need to be judicious in my purchases...

"Ugh... The road to cute is paved with good intentions..."

"What? What does that even mean, Yui?!"

"Oh, sorry. Don't worry about it. Anyway, you can pick the next store... I guess I'll go with you if I have to."

"*If you have to?! Rude much?! Well, luckily for you, I'm happy just going wherever you wanna go.*"

In that case, we'd better hurry. Cute stuff is out there—and it won't wait around forever!

"I'm just glad you're having fun—wait, where are you going?! Slow down!"

"Like I said, I'm going in there next!"

"I... I don't think you said that, actually!"

"Okay, well, I did now! ...Oh, but this is really cute!"

Not sure why, but I keep finding the most adorable must-haves today. Maybe I have good taste in stores, or maybe it's just my lucky day!

"Y-Yui?! That's not the store you pointed at the first time! Where are you going?!"

So much cute, so little time!



"Last event of the day! Woohoo!" Iori exclaimed when we all met back up at the scheduled time that evening.

"I feel like Nagase had more fun than any of us did," I heard Taichi mutter.

To be honest, I had fun today, too. *Lots* of fun. But after we finished our shopping, Yukina totally got on my case, and then I realized:

This was supposed to be a date. Would a good girlfriend ignore her boyfriend and put her own desires first? Absolutely not. My actions were extremely selfish, and now I deeply, *deeply* regretted the way I acted.

"Can we go home now?"

"No! Suck it up, Inaban! Me and Yukina-chan have poured our hearts into this last round, okay?! We're trying to guide you—especially the two gloomy little rainclouds over there!"

Right away, I knew one of those rainclouds was me. But who was the second? I glanced around... and when I saw her, I realized I probably could have guessed it without looking.

Nakayama-chan was standing there, hanging her head, like an abandoned puppy on the side of the road.

"Well, what are we doing next? Let's hurry up and get it over with," Inaba declared loudly, and I got the sense maybe she was trying to move things along for our sake.

"I've been observing you all today," Yukina began, her tone

serious, “and my biggest takeaway was this: Inaba-san and Yaegashi aside, the rest of you have some work to do before you’re a real couple.”

I slumped my shoulders.

“But believe it or not, sometimes all it takes is the right opportunity to get back on track,” Nagase exclaimed, before hitting us with a bombshell: “And that’s why we’re going to make you all play a round of King’s Game! All hail King Iori and Queen Yukina!”

Why can’t you both be queens? I thought to myself, but couldn’t find the energy to actually point it out.

I wanted to take the next step in our relationship, and I was willing to put in the effort... but for some reason, every conversation with Aoki inevitably turned into an argument. Not like a big serious argument, but still.

I wanted to be a good girlfriend. I wanted us to have a cute relationship. And I understood why Yukina got on my case. Obviously it wasn’t cool of me to focus completely on myself the whole time. But if I could make one excuse for my behavior, it would be this: I didn’t *always* act like that. I wasn’t constantly 100% self-focused.

Ugh, why today of all days?

I wanted to make Aoki happy, but today was a total bust...

Well, you know what they say—all’s well that ends well, right? So all I have to do is end the day on a high note!

Mentally, I reviewed the rules of our assignment as dictated to us by Yukina and Iori: no specified location, a 40-minute time limit, and a card with a “mission” that I needed to accomplish by the time we returned. They had us draw our cards at random, and we weren’t allowed to tell each other what our missions were.

“We’re not going to supervise you, so it’s up to you to actually see it through. We’ve given you all a plausible excuse, so use it!” Yukina had announced before sending us all on our way.

While she joked around a lot, it was clear she sincerely cared about us. Same with Iori; her teasing was just proof that she wanted us to have a good time. That’s why I wanted to put the effort in.

I’d been idling at the bottom of the staircase for a long time now, and with a little help from my friends, I’d finally taken my very first step. Now it was time for me to take the next.

My card contained the following mission: *Hold your partner’s*

hand.

It was surprisingly simple, especially for a round of King's Game, which could easily get as crazy as Truth or Dare. I'd braced myself for the worst only to end up... mildly disappointed, actually. But this was all the more reason for me to go through with it.

I looked up at Aoki Yoshifumi walking beside me. He was on the taller side—and not just compared to me, either. His build was lanky rather than toned, and he tended to smile and act silly a lot of the time... but he was always there when I needed him most. In that sense, he was easily the coolest guy I knew.

"Yui?"

"Huhwha?!"

I flinched as he called my name. He didn't hear me thinking that just now, did he?

"I love you."

"Ngyaaahh!"

"Wh-What's wrong?!"

"W-Well, I... I wasn't expecting that!"

"Yeah, I know, but..." He slid a hand into his pocket and pulled out his mission card.

"Oh, I get it. It was your mission." *Makes sense.*

"I gotta say, that was way too easy! Did they forget who they're dealing with?"

"Yeah... They probably wanted someone else to get stuck with that one," I nodded.

These days, I understood exactly how much it took to confess your feelings out loud to the person they went out to. Anyone could drop a casual "I love you" to a friend, but when it came to a serious "I love you," it was almost impossible.

But Aoki had made that serious confession to me dozens upon dozens of times now, because that was just the sort of guy he was. And I loved him, too, though it wasn't as easy for me to say it. Still, there were other ways to express that sort of thing.

By holding hands, for example.

For a long, long time, my androphobia had prevented me from making *any* physical contact with guys. But if I could do it today, it would prove that I had overcome that trauma for good.

To this day, Aoki continued to put my needs first, the same way he had back when we were just friends. He never tried to initiate contact, be it serious or playful, and I got the sense he was waiting

for me to make the first move.

If we were going to take the next step, then that was unmistakably it. It was all resting on my shoulders.

“Shall we walk around for a bit, or are you tired? Wanna sit for a bit? Oh, but knowing you, you’ve probably got horsepower in spades...”

“Don’t call it horsepower! Call it, like... girl power!”

“Why does everything gotta be ‘girl power’ with you...?”

We walked side by side, about one meter apart, with me trailing a half-step behind. I glanced at his hand. *Jeez, Aoki’s got some big mitts.* Then again, maybe they were actually pretty proportional to the rest of him. I always used to be afraid of his giant hands, but now that I looked at them, they seemed really gentle and protective.

All I had to do was take it—the same way I used to grab my dad’s hand when I was little. It was so simple... All I had to do was move my right hand and grab his left—

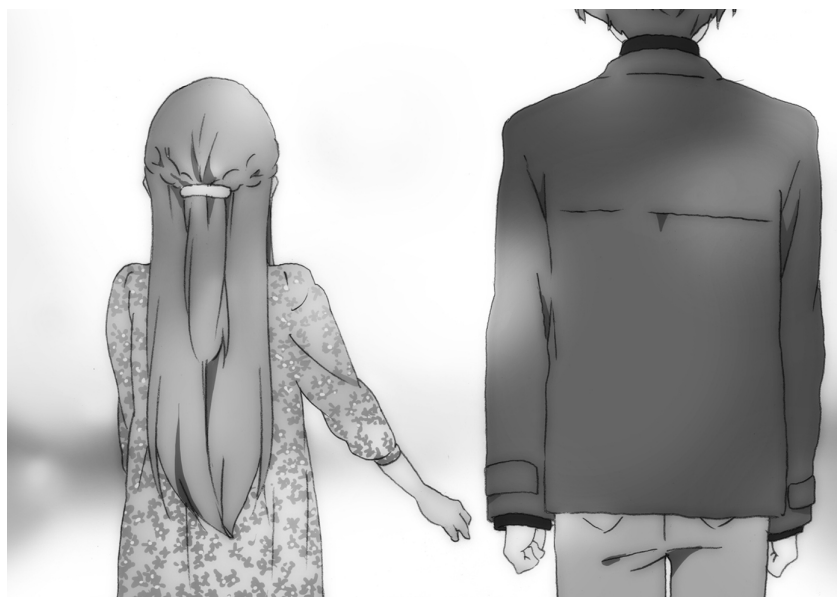
“Nngh...!”

—but for some reason, my hand wouldn’t move. Why? I was over my fear of men, so what was it? Why did my chest feel all fluttery, like I was heading into a championship match at a karate tournament?

Heart thumping, I exhaled slowly... but I was so busy trying to calm myself down while walking, I didn’t have the capacity to move any other part of my body. *Seriously, what’s wrong with me?! It’s freaking me out!*

My body refused to move... almost like something else was in control... but what? My nerves? My fears? My feelings for Aoki? *God, what kind of stubborn mule am I if I can’t even hold a boy’s hand?*

I didn’t want to stagnate at the bottom of the staircase. I wanted to make progress and have a real, serious, romantic relationship! I needed to do this... I needed to be better!



It was so simple, too—all I had to do was take one step closer to him, reach out, and take his hand. I could picture myself doing it with no trouble at all. There was literally no reason I shouldn't have been able to do it for real... and yet I couldn't. Why couldn't I make it happen the same way I could in my head? Why was it so hard when it looked so easy? Honestly, I could imagine myself going a lot further!

Just be brave! No, that's not the problem here... or is it? Ugh, I don't know anymore!

I reached out—and instantly, this threw my other motions out of sync. My right hand started to move in time with my right leg, and my left hand with my left leg.

“Uh, Yui? Whatcha doin’? Did your mission tell you to walk like a robot?”

“No, stupid! Shut up!”

—Taichi and Inaba: Date Pt. 2—

“How’d it go, guys? If you don’t want to talk about it, that’s cool too... though I can probably guess,” Kurihara called as the three couples returned to the meetup spot.

Taichi nodded pensively. Indeed, it was obvious at a glance how their “missions” had gone. Aoki and Ishikawa both seemed perfectly fine, so they’d probably managed theirs without much trouble, but their girlfriends both looked like their souls had left their bodies. One look and he could hazard a guess at their problem: they were both overly eager to the point of ineptitude.

But though he knew their issues would be resolved if they could just act naturally, so too did he understand that it was easier said than done. He could try to advise them, but it wouldn’t help in the long run. Ultimately, this was something they would have to overcome on their own.

As for his and Inaba’s missions, well—in her words, “These ‘newbie couple’ missions were a total cinch.” If this triple date had happened a few months sooner, they might have struggled, but at this point in their relationship, “linking arms” and “sharing a drink” came naturally to them.

“Good effort out there today, everybody!” Kurihara announced, bringing the event to a close, and Kiriya and Nakayama bit their

lip in frustration—in perfect sync, too, almost like they'd planned it. "I'm sure not everything went as smoothly as you would've hoped, but just remember: there's a first time for everything, and now you know what dates are like. Use this experience to guide you next time!"

At the end of Kurihara-sensei's lecture, everyone got ready to go their separate ways—

"That said... I *was* planning to end the event after this, *buuuut* ..." Her eyes glinted sharply, and a moment later, her assistant Nagase jumped in to drop a bombshell:

"Since some of you seem like you could keep going, we've decided to throw in a BONUS STAGE! Yaaaay! ...Uh, hello?! Come on, guys! Were your missions really that soul-crushing?!"

Unfortunately, her good cheer had sailed right over everyone's heads. *Looks like I'll need to help things along.*

"Say what?! A bonus stage?!"

"Want some cheese with that ham? You seriously suck at acting, Taichi," Inaba snarked.

Ouch... Destroyed by my own girlfriend.

"Tell me: what's the crown jewel of this mall?" Nagase asked.

What do you mean, crown jewel? Taichi wondered. Then his gaze drifted upwards. There, it came into view: the giant red ferris wheel affixed to the fifth floor of the six-story building.

"Obviously we can't end this date without riding it at least once, am I right?!" Nagase shouted.

At this, Kurihara grinned. "Two lovers plus one date plus one ferris wheel—the recipe for a perfect happy ending! Name a better combo, I'll wait! Only thing I can think of to top this would be chicken nuggets, fries, and ketchup!"

Once Taichi had purchased their tickets, the two of them got in line for the ride, then boarded their assigned gondola. The interior was spacious enough for a group of four. Once the door was shut, the ferris wheel began to turn, and they steadily rose higher and higher... and considering they were already five stories high in the air when they started, well...

"Whoa... Great view," Inaba murmured, impressed.

Something about the cityscape, tinged red beneath the sunset, evoked a bittersweet sense of melancholy. It made him think about the people who built this city long, long ago—the distant ancestors

of the people who lived here today—and being so high above the very ground he himself had walked hours earlier filled him with a childish sense of glee.

There they were, caught in limbo between childhood and adulthood—a critical juncture in their lives, to be sure.

“We can see quite a ways from up here... I bet my house is somewhere over there.”

“What are you, five? Oh, there’s mine!”

“Liar. There’s no way you can see your exact house.”

As it turned out, riding the ferris wheel was a lot more fun than he’d expected. Before he knew it, they’d reached the top and started their slow descent... almost like they were racing against the sun.

Today was a long day, but now it’s over.

“That ended up being a pretty fun time, huh?” Taichi commented.

“It was nice to go on a capital-D ‘date’ for a change... even if it did get a little embarrassing at times.”

“Yeahhhh...” He had a feeling she was talking about the jewelry store.

“I mean, I’m not really *that* mad about it...”

Idly, Taichi wondered if he’d made a total idiot of himself back there... *Yeah, probably*. In his panic, he’d hidden behind Inaba like a complete coward, to the point that a woman ten years his senior had giggled at him. It was his job to take charge, and yet the task had fallen to his girlfriend instead... What did she think of him after that?

“I’m not judging you, you know. I barely had my shit together back there,” Inaba commented like she’d read his mind. “...What? Why so shocked? I know I’d feel the exact same way in your shoes, that’s all.”

As always, she was one step ahead of him. Had their positions been reversed, he could imagine that their reactions would have been nearly identical.

Below the gondola, he spotted two birds soaring through the sky, side by side.

“You know, today was kind of hectic, but... I think it’s shown that our relationship is perfect just the way it is.”

He didn’t know if it was fate that brought them together, or merely their bizarre circumstances, but he knew their bond was a peculiar one.

"After everything they criticized about us, I have to admit, it gave me pause," Inaba replied. Then, after a moment, she finished, "But I like it this way."

"You sure?"

"We don't have to be like other couples. We should just be ourselves... and we should be damn proud of it, no matter who sees."

Back in the jewelry store, they'd managed to act a bit more naturally right at the end—a quiet declaration of "This is who we are. Deal with it."

"Honestly, I owe it all to you for making the first move," Taichi admitted.

"And that's fine. You have nothing to worry about, Taichi. You're awesome just the way you are."

How could he possibly doubt his girlfriend's word? *If she thinks I'm awesome, then I'm awesome. End of story.*

"Besides... You were saying how you thought some of the rings would 'look really cute on me,' and... I don't think I would've had the courage to say something like that... So yeah, I..."

She faltered and began to fidget. Times like these, it was Taichi's job as her boyfriend to intuit what she was getting at.

"Look at us, *all alone* in here... Sure would be nice if we could be *really mushy* with each other for a change," he mused aloud. Now to wait for her reaction.

"You're such a ham... Okay, fine," she muttered under her breath. "You're so dreamy, Taichi! But I'm only saying it because I know you want me to! Tee hee!"

"Whoa! I don't mind if you want to get lovey-dovey, but don't pounce on me like that! You're making the whole cabin shake!"

"I... I am NOT being lovey-dovey!"

—Nakayama and Ishikawa: Date Pt. 2—

"The sunset's so bright, it's blinding," I murmured as I gazed out at the scenery. No joke, there were tears in my eyes... and after the day I'd had, I didn't really blame myself.

I let out a self-deprecating laugh—

"Wait... Why are *you* laughing, Ishikawa-kun?!"

"Oh, sorry... Just thought that was funny."

What part of it???

We'd been riding this ferris wheel alone together for the past twelve-ish minutes. Just him and me, sitting across from each other, nothing in our way... Yeah, I wasn't doing so great.

"So, um... I wanted to say..."

Soon my date with Ishikawa-kun would come to an end, but first...

"...I'm really sorry about... y'know... how today went."

And putting it into words only made me feel worse.

"What do you mean?"

"I feel like I've only shown you the absolute worst possible version of me! I was a total drag this morning, and an ungirly failure at lunch, and then I completely humiliated myself during the shopping trip..." *Seriously, I could set a new world record for "biggest hot mess" right about now.* "Plus, when I tried to hug you for my King's Game mission, I ended up tackling you to the ground..."

"I admit, I really wasn't expecting it. Still, I'm amazed you were able to take me down."

"God, I'm so sorry!"

"No, don't be. Your lower-body strength is something to be commended."

"I swear, you're the only guy on earth who would say that!" *It's kind of funny, actually.* "Anyway... I'm sorry I couldn't be the perfect girlfriend for you."

"You were trying to be perfect?"

"Yeah... I wanted to give this relationship my best effort, y'know?"

I wanted him to see me as his bubbly, girly girlfriend, 'cuz I figured that was what he wanted.

"Too bad I screwed it all up... Are you gonna dump me...?"

I knew it was cringey of me to ask, but I was scared out of my wits.

"Yeah."

"You're right. Thank you for—wait, WHAAAA?! Isn't this the part where you reassure me and tell me I'm fine the way I am?!"

He's going off-script! Code red! Sound the alarm!

"Sorry. That was a joke."

"OH, THANK GOD! Dang it, Ishikawa-kun! I can never tell when you're messing around! You jerk!" *I thought you were dead serious!*

"I figured you would play along, but I guess you didn't pick up on it."

"You're darn right I didn't! I thought it was over between us! But... it's not, right?"

"It's not, I promise. You honestly thought I was serious about it?"

Together, we heaved a sigh. Time to step back and calm down for a sec.

"I see... I didn't realize you felt that way," he muttered.

"What way?"

"I didn't know you were actively trying to be perfect for me."

"Yeah, I... Wait, what?"

He was completely right, and yet something felt a tiny bit off.

"I, er..." He paused for a minute, then began again. "I think perhaps I was looking at our relationship a bit differently. I know you fell for me due to my more... warrior-like qualities..."

I nodded.

"That said, I... Obviously I can't change myself completely, but... I was thinking I ought to try to be more of a fun and cheerful person, like you."

"Like me?"

"Naturally I can't make myself into your perfect match, but... I do want to try."

Apparently he wanted to change himself. Personally, I was fine with him as-is, but if it was what he wanted... How was I supposed to react? Tell him not to? No, that would be messed up!

Then I realized what exactly felt so off: *relationships don't exist solely for the other person's benefit.*

"But if I do change, I'm not sure how you'll feel about the new me."

"If you wanna transform from a warrior to a super-warrior, knock yourself out!"

"...A super-warrior...?"

"Yeah, y'know, like you're evolving! Anyway, nah, don't worry about it. You do you, my guy! You don't have to live your life to please me."

Like, duh, what a no-brainer. Being in a relationship should never stop you from being yourself! But what about me?

"...Was I wrong?"

Who stood to gain from me putting on an act? Ishikawa-kun? It might look that way, but no. I wanted him to think I was cool, so clearly I was doing it for my own benefit. Or, in the worst-case

scenario, purely to stroke my own ego.

“...Ishikawa-kun...”

“What is it?”

“Can we pretend this date didn’t happen? Actually, no, that’s dumb. Can we... have a rematch? Sometime next week?”

“I’m free Sunday afternoon, if that works for you.”

He answered right away, with no hesitation. *Just like a warrior! So manly!*

“Alrighty! I hope you’ll be ready for me to give it one more try!”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m gonna try to have more fun next time around. And that way it’ll be more fun for you, too!”

Maybe next time I won’t care about what other people think. Seriously, what was I so hung up on back there? Dating someone isn’t about making them like you or changing yourself to suit their preferences. It’s about figuring out what you both need. Together.

“Fair warning, but I’m gonna kick it into high gear next time. Is that cool?” I asked, just in case.

“Good, because I don’t intend to be outdone.”

“Oh yeah?! You think you can keep up with High-Speed Mariko?!”

A normal girlfriend would probably act more demure and feminine in front of her boyfriend, but that just wasn’t the kind of girl I was. Besides, my way was more fun! And judging from the smile on Ishikawa-kun’s face, I got the feeling he was inclined to agree.

May our relationship prosper evermore... Amen.

—Kiriya and Aoki: Date Pt. 2—

“Whoaaaa! Check it out, Yui! Look how high up we are!” Aoki exclaims with childlike glee as he peers through the glass of our gondola.

On any other day I would’ve been squealing right along with him, but after today, I’m completely devastated. Ugh, this sucks. I’m being such a buzzkill.

Never in my wildest dreams did I imagine this would be such a catastrophe.

“What’s wrong, Yui? You seem kinda blue.”

Will Aoki get mad at me for ruining the mood? I know I sure

would, if it was the other way around.

“Look, um... I’m sorry about earlier! I was supposed to hold hands with you for my mission, but I just couldn’t do it!”

Regret sets in as soon as the words leave my mouth. Maybe I shouldn’t have told him. Maybe it’ll hurt his feelings. I swear, I’m always like this. Me and my big mouth.

“Oh, gotcha. Darn... That’s a shame,” Aoki grins. But this only makes me feel worse.

Why aren’t you mad at me? Just get mad at me already! If you keep coddling me, I... I...

“...I’ll never be the kind of girlfriend you want...”

“Huh? You’re not breaking up with me, are you...?!”

“No, no, no! I’m not going to dump you!” Ugh, I can’t believe he made me say that out loud... So embarrassing...

“Whew! That’s a relief. Wait, but... then what did you mean?”

“Well, you know... I’ll never be a real, actual girlfriend.”

“What are you talkin’ about? Back when we first got together, you told me flat-out that it might be more like a regular friendship, remember?”

“Yeah, but...”

But dating is supposed to be “more special” than that.

“Uhh, Yui...?” There, for the first time, his expression grew concerned. “Did you... not have a good time today?”

Oh, NOW you look worried? It’s a little late for that!

“‘Cuz I was doin’ my best to show you a good time, and—”

“Yeah, I know! And your stupid coddling is partly why our date turned out the way it did!” I snap at him. I know I don’t have the right to get mad—if anything, Aoki’s the one who should be yelling right now—but I just can’t help it.

“*Coddling*, huh... Ugh, you’re right. Deep down, I had a feeling it probably wasn’t the right thing to do.” His expression turns grave. Regretful.

“Stop that! Look... it’s *my* fault, okay?! ”

And if you blame yourself for my mistakes, I’m gonna feel like total trash!

“Listen... I know I’m a mess, but I still managed to go on that date with Misaki-chan, remember?”

I know you remember, because you were literally spying on us.

“I *do* want to take our relationship to the next level, but... whenever I’m with you, I just keep screwing it all up.”

Ugh, why am I throwing a pity party during the most romantic part of the date?! This is nothing like how I imagined it would be. I can't do anything right. And now I've probably hurt Aoki, too.

"...So you only screw up because I'm around?"

For some reason, he seems kind of... pleased about this? I don't understand.

"Yeah...?"

"So I make you self-conscious?"

"O-Of course you do, stupid! You're my boyfriend!"

"So does that mean... you're attracted to me after all?"

"Wha...?!"

I stare at him in shock. What? I don't... understand...

My cheeks burn hot. Someone get me off of this stupid ride!

"Yui, wait! *Yui* ! Stay away from the door! It's not safe!"

I snap to my senses. Yikes! What was I thinking?! Hastily, I sit back down.

Across from me, Aoki grins and leans back against the bench.

"Holy crap, I feel so much better now! For real, I was super worried you didn't like me that way. I mean, I know you kept sayin' you love me, and I figured you wouldn't date me otherwise, but still..."

"That's the dumbest thing I've ever heard."

Embarrassed, I look out the window. At the top of the ferris wheel, the buildings had looked so tiny... but now they're getting bigger again, and our view is shrinking. Soon our private time will come to an end.

"Honestly, now that I know you think I'm hot, I'd say today was a roaring success!"

"Will you shut up?!"

And wipe that stupid smirk off your face!

"Is that really all it takes to make you happy? To be honest, I think it's kind of offensive that you'd feel insecure about that at all!"

"No offense intended! Like you said, I was just insecure, that's all. I can't always be Mr. Confident, y'know."

That's... actually kind of a surprise. I wasn't expecting him to have insecurities, and if he did, I wouldn't think he'd reveal them to me. I mean, he always seems so confident...

"Do you just try to act cool whenever I'm around?"

"...Even if that was true, you know I can't say yes to that."

Otherwise I'd have to hand in my man card."

"Pffft." I laugh in spite of myself.

As it turns out, Aoki has worries of his own, the same as anyone else... All of a sudden, I feel like I can relate to him a lot more. Deep down, part of me always believed he was untouchable in a way I could never be. Of course, I can't tell him that... Not right now, at least. Maybe someday.

Anyway.

"I'm sorry I made you feel insecure about my attraction to you."

"C'mon, no need to apologize."

"B-But... I can't even do the most basic girlfriend things!"

"Like what?"

"Huh? Oh, uh... Well, you know... When you date someone, you're supposed to start by holding hands, or linking arms..."

"I think that's the wrong way to look at it," Aoki says with a frown. "Alright, I don't think I need to mince words here," he mutters to himself under his breath, then continues, "Dating isn't about crossing items off a checklist."

Oh. Well, when you put it that way, you might be right. But then what is the point?

"Dating is about sharing our lives with each other. As long as we're happy, it doesn't matter what that looks like."

Good grief... This idiot. I swear, he has some kind of superpower where he always knows exactly what to say.

"Ugh, you loser... You're so dreamy," I retort. Then, a moment too late, I realize what I said.

"Huh? Dreamy? For reals?! You think I'm dreamy?! Hell yeah!"

"No! I..."

He gives me the sad puppy-dog eyes. Ugh, that's cheating and you know it!

"...Okay, fine. Yes, you're dreamy."

"Dreamy, huh... That's awesome! Rock on, me!"

"Aaaand just like that, the magic is gone."

"Nooooo ! C'mooooon!"

You know, it's funny. Everything about this is so stupid; it's not how I wanted it to play out at all. Our relationship is nothing like the kind of storybook romance you see on TV... and yet... that's what makes it so *unique*. From now on, the two of us are going to share our lives together the way only *we* can.

Looking back, that triple date was completely ridiculous... but

hey, that's how we got our start. Same for Nakayama and Ishikawa, probably. Like it or not, we've now officially taken our first step. Sure, it wasn't all roses, but in the end, I'm grateful to Yukina for what she did for us—even if she *did* kinda bite my head off.

I couldn't complete my King's Game mission, but... maybe I can take my second step while I'm at it. Sure, why not? I may as well ask him...

“Hey, so... what's the one thing you want from me the most right now?”

“A kiss!”

Ugh!

“Hey! Don't kick me!”

I'm trying to throw you a bone here! Don't ruin it!!!



A Mad Dash Down My Destined Path

I want to be cool.

That was my driving motivation when I, Enjouji Shino, started high school, and now it's been a full year. Well, okay, technically just ten months, but it *feels* like a year. It's February now, and once April rolls around, my first year of high school will officially come to an end.

God, it's so cold. Really, really cold. Cannot wait for spring, honestly. All the biggest school events are behind us now... Well, except for finals... Ugh, kill me now. Okay, you know what? I'm just gonna sweep that right under the rug. There we go.

So, have I achieved "cool" status?

I mean, obviously I'm not under any delusions that I'll ever be the real deal, but I wouldn't mind trying it out, you know, for a day or so.

At the start of the year I'd almost entirely given up... but then I met my senpai in the Cultural Research Club and managed to improve myself a tiny bit.

Alongside Uwa Chihiro, I joined their club, and we all had so many adventures together! We overcame countless obstacles (including some downright unbelievable supernatural ones) and thanks to that, I improved a little more.

That was how I learned that I was capable of enacting change—with regards to both myself *and* the world around me.

This past year has been the craziest year of my life. I had so much fun... made so many new friends, both in my club and in my class... went to so many new places... All in all, I'm more than satisfied with what I accomplished. But if you asked me whether any of that made me "cool," my conclusion would be:

"Hmmm... No, I don't think so."

Which is fine, since I'm not trying to be the real deal. Maybe I'm just getting too big for my britches... Humans are greedy creatures, after all. Hmm.

Well, assuming for a fact that I'm not within the standards of "cool," what exactly am I missing? Let's take a look at my CRC senpai for comparison.

“...A boyfriend?”

Of my five senpai, four of them are dating someone (namely, each other). Four out of a total of seven club members—that’s more than 50 percent! The majority of my club is currently up to their eyeballs in romance!

Yeah... Romance seems like a critical element. If I fall in love with someone, will the world start to seem like a more beautiful place? But then again, there’s still one senpai who isn’t seeing anyone, and she’s still really beautiful herself...

What makes something “beautiful,” anyway? I should probably stop to think it through. But my puny brain has its limits... and I can’t think of anyone who I could consult about it... I don’t suppose there’s anyone around here who conveniently has a vested interest in this subject, is there? Someone who could use their powers of analysis to guide me?

Like maybe... a Love Guru?

+ + +

It was lunchtime, and I, Fujishima Maiko, was just wrapping up a conversation with a little lost lamb.

“Thank you so much, Fujishima-san! Now I can finally make up with my boyfriend!”

“Glad to hear it. But do try to take his needs into account; even if you’re afraid of losing him again, you have to respect his space. Try to take a step back every now and then and look at the relationship from his perspective.”

“I’ll keep that in mind. Thank you!” And with a friendly salute, the girl dashed off, grinning from ear to ear.

As I watched her go, I reached up and pretended to wipe the sweat from my brow. I wasn’t actually sweating, of course. The winter winds were blowing at full force today, and I was freezing. If anything, I just wanted to celebrate a job well done. Just a formality, you know.

“Whew. Another good deed in the books.”

I was the gardener, helping love blossom one bud at a time. Like Cupid himself, I daresay. And while my second year of high school was coming to an end, there was always more work to be done. Love never took a day off, and so, neither did its Apostle. In fact, I was anticipating overtime. After all, it was February, and we were

quickly approaching the year's most romantic holiday: Valentine's Day.

Of course, I wasn't doing this work purely out of obligation. I was listening to my own desires and following my heart.

Today was another busy day, and in a blink, it was all over. My life was going smoothly, and I had no real complaints. But sometimes... every now and then... I found myself wanting more.

This dissatisfaction never lasted very long, but it always came back, gnawing away at my heart. And if I focused on it too hard, it would ripple through me until I couldn't stand it any longer. It made me want to change the way I lived my life.

To be clear, however, my situation really wasn't all that dire. It was by no means enough justification to derail my entire lifestyle. If I ignored it, it eventually went away. If anything, it was merely the sort of fleeting melancholy everyone felt from time to time—the yearning desire to leave everything behind and start over from scratch somewhere new. Anyone could relate to that, right?

Each time I felt it creep back up, I would lose all my motivation for the day. As you can imagine, this was rather inconvenient.

Was there a root cause for this dissatisfaction? Ideally, I hoped to alleviate it somehow... And once I found the solution, I had a feeling my whole world might change...

Just as I was on my way back to the classroom, I spotted some familiar faces. I was acquainted with the majority of the students at this school, and yet for some reason, fate kept pulling me back to those same five people: Yaegashi Taichi, Nagase Iori, Inaba Himeko, Kiriya Yui, and Aoki Yoshifumi, the five second-year members of the Cultural Research Club.

I'd grown quite close to them over the past two years... Well, maybe not Aoki. But I digress.

The five of them were gathered outside in the courtyard, chatting away, almost like they were *enjoying* the cold weather. They were all smiles and laughter—yes, very picturesque. If this were a manga, the background would have sparkles and flowers. In other words, one could tell from a single glance that they were—

“So cool...”

“I know, right?!”

This immediate, unexpected response made me jump out of my skin.

“Oh! I'm sorry! I agreed with you so hard, I accidentally blurted

it out loud! I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry!"

It was Enjouji Shino, a first-year Cultural Research Club member with big puppy-dog eyes and thick, poofy hair. In a blink, she'd gone from over-enthusiastic to over-apologetic.

"Hello there, Enjouji-san."

"Oh, um, hi! ...Wait, you remembered my name?! But we hardly ever talk!"

" 'Hardly' is still better than 'never.' And besides, you came to interview us that one time."

"I'm so honored," she murmured, awestruck.

She's so down-to-earth and adorable... I'd love to corrupt—Ahem! Down, tiger.

"Hey! Enjouji! Forget it. I'm leaving without you," scoffed another familiar face as he turned to go.

"Would it kill you to wait for her, Uwa-kun?" I called.

"Oh... Hello there, senpai."

Uwa Chihiro was the other first-year member of the Cultural Research Club, notable for his aloof personality and handsome, almost androgynous features. He inclined his head in greeting.

"Come to think of it, I don't think I've had much opportunity to speak to you, either. Really not sure how you know our names."

"Oh, please! We've met once or twice, haven't we? What sort of uncaring monster do you take me for?"

"You can memorize someone's name after *two* conversations...? That's incredible... Especially considering you've talked to at least half the school," Enjouji murmured.

"Now, where were we... Oh, yes. You were agreeing with me, right, Enjouji-san?"

"Yeah... I'm sor—hwaahh!"

"You'll have to forgive my friend here; she gets a little out of control sometimes. Just ignore her."

"Oh, no apology necessary. I encourage you to be true to your heart's desires." *If anything, I aspire to be more like that myself. Feels like I've lost touch with my inner child lately.* "So tell me, was it the word 'cool' that caught your attention?"

"Y-Yeah... I saw my senpai chatting over there, and they were radiating this incredible aura..."

"Yes, that magnificent aura..." Truly, that beautiful warmth was something I could never replicate.

"Is there a story between you and the CRC?" Uwa-kun asked as

we all stared at the group in the courtyard.

“Oh, yes. A rather long story, at that. Destiny, you might say.”

“...Riiight.”

“Wow... Hmm... Your connection to the club must run really deep.”

Indeed, Enjouji-san was correct. But they had something I lacked... and whether the reverse proved true still remained to be seen.

“They have a sort of ‘it’ factor that’s hard to pinpoint, wouldn’t you agree?”

“Yes! Exactly! I really wish I knew how to be cool like them, but it’s a total mystery! I... I mean, I know I’ll never stop being a loser at heart, but just once, I’d like to know what it feels like to walk in their shoes... I want to learn from them, but it’s just not going very well for me...”

“So, you’re making an active effort to try to be cool?”

“Wait, what?! How did you guess?!”

Bit of a ditz, this one.

“And I imagine you feel the same way, right, Uwa-kun?”

“Wh-What are you talking about?”

You walked right into that one, didn’t you? I’ll take that as a yes.

Evidently, the original members of the Cultural Research Club were now so impressive that their little underclassmen saw them as role models.

“In that sense, I admit I find myself drawn to your club in much the same way.”

Somehow, those five felt... *different*. But what was their secret? I was dying to know. And I knew I wasn’t the only one.

“I know I’ll never be like them, but... I can’t help but dream,” Enjouji-san murmured.

Did I share that dream? Of being like the CRC? Of being cool? This led me to another question:

“What does it mean to be ‘cool,’ anyway?”

Admittedly, I only had a surface-level understanding of the concept.

“It’s not one of those things you can really define,” Uwa-kun replied without missing a beat.

Well then.

“In that case, perhaps I should seek the answer for all of us.”

Nothing gets me going like a worthy cause!

“I don’t think anyone here asked you to do that.”

“Oh, don’t pretend you’re not curious. Besides, I’d like to establish a concrete definition if I can.”

What is “cool,” and why does the CRC pentagon have it nailed down? What is this vague sense of dissatisfaction that plagues me?

“Th-That sounds wonderful!” Enjouji-san exclaimed, eyes sparkling, reminiscent of an excitable little puppy.

“Meh, I don’t care either way.”

“You’re a bad liar, Chihiro-kun.”

“Hey! Screw you!”

Ah, friendship.

The prospect was an amusing one, and since I’d already located two like-minded individuals who shared my passion for the cause—

“Why don’t we all investigate it together?”



Initially, Uwa-kun was resistant to the idea, claiming it was “stupid” and “too much work.” But Enjouji-san seemed determined to rope him into it, and in the end, he caved.

Now then!

“Today we formally declare the birth of the CRC It-Factor Investigation Team!”

Our mission: to observe the ecology of cool people (in this case, the CRC pentagon) in their native habitat, then use our findings to make ourselves cooler! Or something like that!

“At your service, Fujishima-senpai!”

“That’s the dumbest team name I’ve ever heard.”

“Glad to see you’re both as excited as I am!”

“...Are you even listening to me...?”

And so the newly-minted CRCIFIT got started almost immediately. We decided to meet up after school that same day, since none of us had other plans.

Winter was an off-season for most of the school’s athletic teams, and with the third-years focused on college entrance exams, many of the non-athletic clubs—the CRC included—had wrapped up their scheduled activities for the remainder of the calendar year. As such, the whole school felt a bit too quiet.

“Did you have permission from your club to be here?”

“Oh, yes! Attendance is hardly ever mandatory, so we just

stopped by for a few minutes!” Enjouji-san explained, her hand raised. She was wearing a heavy coat over her uniform.

“I’m willing to goof off with you, but just for today, got it?” Uwa-kun grumbled, his hands buried in his coat pockets.

“Oh, Chihiro-kun, you’re such a *tsundere* .”

“There’s literally no comeback I can make that’ll convince you otherwise, is there?”

“Well played, Enjouji-san.”

The easiest way to ensure victory: drag your opponent down to your level!

“First, let’s establish whether the CRC truly are as cool as we think they are. After all, it’s possible we’re simply biased, and it’s not safe to make conclusions based on that sort of subjectivity.”

“Hold on—let me jot that down real quick.”

“Yeah... If you ask me, I’d say you’re both delusional.”

Naturally, I elected to ignore Uwa-kun’s little *tsundere* comments.

First things first, I decided to pull up the dictionary definition of the word. One internet search later, I located the following:

cool (adj.)

Fashionably attractive or impressive.

Yes, of course. Fashionable, attractive, and/or impressive. I could see it, for sure... but something felt missing. The others seemed to agree with this assessment.

With that established, our next move was to ask around. Our first interviewee: a boy who was in Class 1-C with me last year. Once we confirmed that he was available to speak with us, we started the interview at once.

“Is the CRC cool? Oh, absolutely,” he answered with no hesitation.

“What is it that gives you that impression?”

“Well, y’know... guys and girls hanging out together? No awkwardness?”

“So they’re cool because their friendship extends across the gender gap?”

“I mean... not exactly... But if you can’t hang out with the opposite sex, then you’re probably not that cool, right?”

Sounds like a necessary condition, then.

“Are there any other people who come to mind when you hear the word ‘cool’?”

After a few more questions, we brought the interview to a close.

“Thank you for your input. It was very helpful.”

“Sorry my answers were so vague... but yeah, I do think the CRC members are a textbook example of cool,” the boy replied.

“...Our CRC senpai are so incredible...!” Enjouji-san gushed.

“Yeah... Apparently even the second-years agree,” Uwa-kun mused.

“Likewise, I apologize for the rather philosophical nature of my questions. One last thing before I let you go...”

I had a feeling the answer would be no, but I wanted to see what would happen if I asked.

“Am I cool?”

“Yeah... I think.”

You THINK?

“You’re cool in a different way. You can talk to just about anyone, girl or guy, but... you don’t really ‘hang out’ with them. You’re sort of... *all business*, you know?”

Yes, I get that a lot, actually. But I’m afraid I must protest!

I did my homework, I raised my hand during class, I studied for tests, I ran errands for the school, I worked hard for the Student Council Outreach Committee, I did volunteer work, I helped people wherever possible... and yet this was their opinion of me.

Why try so hard? they would ask me. Why put in so much unnecessary effort?

Admittedly, there *was* a point in time where I was a bit too attached to my reputation and title, but still.

“Is it not possible to be both cool *and* all business?”

“Sure, of course it is.”

I didn’t understand it. I was just... I was just *living my life!* Why did everyone form this same opinion about me? If I kept chasing the concept of cool, would I find an answer?

“Hey, Uwa! Enjouji-san!”

Before long, a group of first-year boys walked up. Evidently, they were acquainted with the CRC kouhai.

“What’s up, guys?”

“What’s up with *you*, Tada?” Uwa-kun retorted.

“W-We were just... um...” Enjouji-san began.

Now that the first-years had started to chat amongst themselves, I felt it was the ideal time to end the interview.

“Anyway, sorry for bothering you. Talk to you again soon.”

“No problem... Actually, there was one thing I wanted to ask you.”

“Go for it.”

As thanks for the fun interview, I was more than happy to return the favor.

“Have you been hearing all those weird rumors floating around lately?”

“Weird rumors?”

“Yeah! They say there’s gonna be some kind of large-scale experiment happening soon, and they’re going to force a bunch of people into it.”

“I beg your pardon? Is that an urban legend or something? Or is it some sort of university research project?”

“No idea! I just heard about it from... Wait, who *did* I hear it from?”

“Well, suffice it to say, I haven’t heard anything about it.”

“Gotcha. Alright then, just wanted to ask.”

Once the first-years were done talking, the Investigation Team resumed its... well... investigation.

“The CRC? Yeah, totally!”

“They’re super cool!”

“Reeee! Death to normies!”

We received a variety of responses to our questions, all of them affirming the CRC’s status as cool. Next, it was time to discuss our findings.

“So, it seems safe to say that the CRC pentagon are indeed ‘cool.’ One of the reasons offered for this is that they socialize in a mixed-gender group.”

“Mixed-gender... Boys and girls... Together...” Enjouji-san murmured.

“So, what next?” Uwa-kun asked.

“As the CRCIFIT, our task is to examine our findings in search of something we can utilize in our own lives. Perhaps it’d be fastest if we simply tried out being cool for ourselves.”

“What?”

“WHAT?!”

Oh, surely it’s not THAT much of a surprise.

“I don’t know for sure whether we can actually replicate the exact lived experience of a cool person, but if we at least attempted

to mimic what it looks like from the outside, perhaps we might make some worthwhile discoveries.”

“I-If it was that easy, we wouldn’t be here right now!”

“You’d be surprised. If mixed-gender socializing is such a crucial component, then we may as well test the theory.”

C’est simple!

“Either you’re a genius or you’re the dumbest person alive.”

“Probably the former, Uwa-kun. Let’s just give it a try!”

“She... She’s even more aggressive than Inaba-senpai...!”

“What’s the matter with you two? You want to be cool, don’t you?”

“Urk...!”

As I walked down the hallway, I spotted a boy I knew, standing around and generally looking bored.

“Hey there, Aiba-kun. Are you free at the moment?”

“Huh? Well... yeah, sure...”

The first step to hanging out with someone: general proximity. I took a large step forward.

He took a step backwards.

I took another step forward. He took another step backwards.

I took *another* step forward. He took another step backwards... right into the wall behind him. Now I had inadvertently cornered him. *Oops* .

“Wh-What is it?”

Oh well. At least now we’re definitely hanging out with each other... technically. Step one: check!

“Let’s talk.”

“T-Talk?!”

For some reason, Aiba seemed rather nervous.

“Yes, I’d like to have a deep conversation with you. We could discuss... sex, perhaps?”

“Sex ...?!”

After all, what better way to “hang out” with a close male friend than to have a deep philosophical conversation about the intricacies of gender?

Wait, but then... why is he panicking? Is he... *sweating*? In the middle of winter? Oh, I get it. He must be the innocent type.

“Never mind. Let’s talk love instead. Tell me about your current crush.”

“My... current crush...?”

“Don’t you have one?”

“...Honestly, not really...”

“Surely you jest! I know you have one. Surely you *must* have one.”

“No, really, I don’t! Sorry, but uh, what is this about, exactly?! Why are you coming on so... Wait... Is this what I think it is...?”

Aiba seemed to intuit something. His face flushed pink.

“Aha! You’ve thought of someone, I can tell! Now out with it!”

“Are you asking me because you...? No, that can’t be it. That can’t possibly be it!”

“Don’t deny your feelings! Whoever you thought of just now—that’s your crush!”

Love is all in the heart, not in the head!

“What...? So you want *me* to confess to... No, no, this can’t be right!”

“You’re ready to confess?! Well then, quit dawdling around!”

“W-Wait! Slow down! I’m... I’m confused!”

“Hesitation is normal, but you have to push through it, Aiba-kun!”

“What, so... you think I should just say it for the hell of it?!”

“That’s the spirit! Go for broke!”

“You’re right... The reason I’ve never dated anyone is because I’ve never had the courage to ask. No risk, no reward!”

“Precisely! Now what are you waiting for? Go for it!”

“R-Right now?! I... I think that’s moving a little too quickly...”

“You think you can just sit around and wait for it to come to you?”

“Well, no... If I’ve got nothing to lose, I may as well make my first-ever confession and just get it over with! I can do it! I can handle a little rejection!”

“Yes, you can! I believe in you!”

“Okay, but who...? I guess I’ve got a perfectly good candidate right here... O-Okay, um... Fujishima-san, will you g—”

But just then, Uwa-kun and Enjouji-san came crashing onto the scene!

“Sorry, but we’re going to have to stop you before this failboat completely capsizes!”

“She means well, I promise! Please find it in your heart to forgive her!”

"What are you two doing? We were just getting to the good part!"

"You don't secretly like this person, do you, Fujishima-senpai?"

"Aiba-kun? Oh, no. Not at all."

"Thought as much! C'mon, Enjouji, let's get these two away from each other!"

"Y-You got it, Chihiro-kun!"

"Haha... 'Not at all,' she says... Hahaha... Rejected before I even got the words out... I couldn't even *ask* ... Hahaha..."

"Wh-Where are you taking me?!"

"Someplace where you can't break his spirit, Fujishima-senpai!"

"That was almost a complete disaster," Uwa-kun sighed.

"I apologize... I admit, I got a little carried away back there." *It was so much fun, I couldn't help myself. Love is a forbidden fruit that drives people mad...* "Don't worry. I'll just patch things up with him later."

"Are you sure you can? Because I'm not."

"Oh, relax. I always follow through on my loose ends. Why do you think they call me the Goddess of Love?"

At this, Enjouji-san finally pushed herself up from the table where she'd collapsed facedown.

"You really do have the power of a goddess... You make snap decisions, and then you act on them at the speed of light... It's inhuman..."

"I couldn't agree more, Enjouji. I don't think either of us can keep up with her."

This was a sentiment I was used to hearing. I knew I worked at a faster pace than most people, but I didn't see the need to slow myself down.

Still... it could get lonely at the top. Was that the reason I wasn't cool?

Well, at least I had these two comrades with me.

"Fine, whatever. It's your turn next."

"...It is?" my two kouhai asked in unison.

"Now, let's go find ourselves the perfect prey... I mean, target!"

"'Target' isn't any less sinister-sounding, you know!"

"Hey, Shimono. My friend here wants to talk to you."

"Huh? Enjouji-san wants to talk to *me* ?! Sure, I'll talk! What's up?!"

“Oh... um... well... I...”

“You can come a little closer, y’know. He won’t bite.”

“D-D-Don’t push me, Chihiro-kun!”

“...Can you guys stop flirting right in front of me?”

“We’re not flirting!”

“If you’re making physical contact, then you’re flirting! Uwa and Enjouji-san, sitting in a tree!”

“Oh god, I’m gonna die...! Oh, there’s Tomomi-chan. Tomomi-chaaaaan!”

“Hmm? Did someone call my name?”

“I sure did! Apparently Chihiro-kun wants to talk to you!”

“Stop! Don’t drag me into this!”

“B-But you promised to do it with me!”

“Well, don’t rush me—”

“Sure, let’s talk! What’s up, Uwa-kun?”

“Oh... uh... well...”



“So tell me: what was it like, having an intimate conversation with the opposite sex?”

“Exhausting...”

“Same...”

Indeed, they both looked ready to pass out. Pathetic.

“Did you feel cool?”

“I’m now fully convinced that the road to coolness is impossibly long...”

“Impossible sounds about right, yeah.”

Evidently, our experiment wasn’t very effective. “I must say, I didn’t feel very cool either,” I agreed.

“Hanging out” didn’t mean aggressively approaching someone who didn’t reciprocate. It was important to build a strong mutual connection first.

“Let’s change tack. Do you have the energy to try again?”

“Yes, please! I... I refuse to give up after one try!”

“Personally, I’d like to go home now.”

“Glad to see you’re both still raring to go!”

“Yup!”

Uwa-kun fell silent in defeat, and I made a mental note to apologize to him later.

“What are the requirements of being cool? Or rather, what is it that the CRC pentagon has that we lack? Can you think of anything?”

“Someone to date...? Well, no, Iori-senpai’s still single... Oh! Hobbies, maybe?” Enjouji-san suggested.

“Doesn’t everyone have a hobby?” Uwa-kun asked.

“W-Well, yeah, but... but our senpai are all really passionate about theirs!”

“Hmm... Yaegashi-kun *does* have a borderline unhealthy obsession with pro wrestling, and Inaba-san seems rather knowledgeable about computers... Oh, and Kiriya-san loves all things cute, of course... What about the other two? I can’t remember.”

“They both have a love for all things fun... but now that I say it out loud, it doesn’t really sound like an actual hobby,” Uwa-kun mused. “Maybe we’re missing something.”

“I don’t know. It feels like we’re on the right track,” I replied. “It’s important to find one’s true passion, because that passion will color your whole life. For example, imagine what Yaegashi-kun would be like without his love of pro wrestling.”

“Hmmm...” Enjouji-san closed her eyes and folded her arms in contemplation. “He... He’d turn into a bland, flavorless background character!”

“You better not let Taichi-san hear you say that. You’ll make him cry.”

“Oh, no, I was joking. He’d still have his sexy voice, if nothing else.”

“You can be really harsh sometimes, you know that?”

“So, what do we think, team? Do hobbies seem important?”

“Yes, I think so!”

“Though it’s possible they aren’t cool because they have *hobbies*, per se, but rather because they have something they really care about.”

“A keen observation, Uwa-kun.” *He might just be smarter than I took him for.*

If I wanted my kouhai to better themselves, it was crucial I showed them that I valued their opinions. Now that we’d dug up a useful hint, it was time to put it into practice... but how?

“What about you? Do either of you have any hobbies?”

“Not really...”

"It doesn't have to be a deep obsession. Anything will do."

"Well... I like listening to foreign music..."

"I like... playing with my pet dog?"

"Well then, let's give that a try."

"What?" they asked in unison.

"It's time to test our hypothesis!"

We picked an empty classroom at random and walked in. Enjouji-san and I sat side by side, while Uwa-kun sat in front of us, almost like he was our personal DJ. And in a sense, he was.

He pulled out his MP3 player and set it to play through its external speakers. The sound quality wasn't great, but that wasn't important.

"I'll start with the more mainstream bands."

Then I heard the peal of an electric guitar, and recognized the song as one I'd heard in the background of a commercial on TV. This was American rock, if memory served.

But Uwa-kun didn't give us any further details about the artist, so instead the three of us just listened in silence. Four minutes later, the song came to an end.

"I liked it. Very empowering. What about you, Enjouji-san?"

"Oh, yes! It's the sort of song that picks you right up!"

"This particular band actually broke up at one point, and they just recently got back together. Honestly, I hate to say it, but their new stuff is all trash."

"Oh."

"Hmm."

Silence.

"Well, this is excruciating. Can we stop now?"

Seeing as Uwa-kun asked so nicely, we decided to end things there.

"Well, now it's time to try out Enjouji-san's hobby... but we don't exactly have a dog on hand. Hmm."

"S-Sorry, but Bobby isn't the kind of super-dog that can hear me calling him from across town..."

"Gee, that sucks. Anyway, looks like we won't be able to—"

"What if we went to one of the parks nearby? I imagine plenty of people are out walking their dogs at this hour. Perhaps one of them would let us play with theirs."

"Oh, that sounds fun!" Enjouji-san flailed her arms excitedly.

“Ugh...”

“What’s wrong, Chihiro-kun?”

“Nothing. I just... don’t see the point in playing with dogs at the park.”

“With that attitude, you’ll never be cool,” I remarked, and Uwa-kun fell silent.

Wait... Does he not realize I was joking?

“If you ask me, it can’t hurt to give it a try, just once. Nothing’s going to change unless you step outside of your comfort zone,” I continued.

This seemed to resonate with both Enjouji-san and Uwa-kun; their eyes filled with passion, and they nodded firmly.

Look at me, dropping truth bombs without even trying. They ought to lock me up!

“H-Hi there! Your dog’s really cute!” Enjouji-san called out to an elderly man resting on a bench. At first she was rather resistant to the idea of initiating a conversation with a stranger... but then she saw his Shiba Inu and seemingly changed her mind.

“Hello there, young lady. Are you a student at Yamaboshi High School?”

Fortunately, the man was every bit as friendly as he looked to be. And since he was just sitting around, we probably weren’t interrupting anything... Enjouji-san glanced back at me, and I gave her a thumbs-up.

“Could we play with your dog for a little bit?!”

“With Gonta? Of course! Be my guest. These days I’m getting too old to roughhouse with him, so I’m sure he’d appreciate it.”

And so, with his owner’s permission, Enjouji-san took Gonta’s leash. Uwa-kun and I raised our hands in greeting as we approached.

“Come here, Gonta-kun! Eeek! Hey! Haha... hahaha!”

When Enjouji-san crouched down, the little Shiba Inu ran over and jumped up, resting his front paws on her chest. He nuzzled his face against her, then started to jump and frolic like he was begging to be played with.

“Hey! Wait! Calm down—eeek! I’ll get you back for that one!” She playfully ruffled his fur.

“It’s like watching two puppies play-fight.”

“Seriously, Enjouji, how did you make friends with it *that*

quickly...?”

“I... I’ve always been popular with small animals for some reason...”

“Yeah, probably because they recognize you as one of their own.”

“Hey! Gonta-kun! Wait, what? So... the animals have all accepted me as a friend?! That’s incredible!”

“...That joke sailed right over her head, didn’t it...”

Once Enjouji-san had had her fill of playtime, she commanded him to “Sit, boy!” Surprisingly, Gonta promptly did as he was told. Either this dog was exceptionally well-trained, or Enjouji-san had a special way with animals.

“Okay, Chihiro-kun, it’s your turn. Trust me, it’s fun!”

“Right... uh... Yeah, I could tell you were having a good time, so I think I’m all set.”

“What’s the matter? Come on!” She tugged on the leash, leading Gonta toward Uwa-kun.

“Wait, wait, wait! Give me a minute! I’ll approach him when I’m ready!” he shouted, taking a few steps back.

“Wait... Are you... scared of dogs...?”

For a moment, Uwa-kun’s face froze. “Of... Of course not! That’s stupid!”

“C’mon, Gonta. Let’s play with this nice boy!”

“Stop! I said give me a minute, damn it!”

“Pffft... I can’t believe you’re scared of a little doggy.”

“Screw you, okay?!”

Summoning all his resolve, Uwa-kun walked up to the Shiba Inu. Slowly, he crouched down... and timidly reached out his hand.

“Go on!”

Enjouji-san gave Gonta a little push, and the dog ran forward to curl himself around Uwa-kun’s legs.

“Gaaahh!”

Uwa-kun shot upright and froze stock-still like a statue.

“Hee hee hee!”

“I’m gonna get you for this, Enjouji, you little twerp!” he growled. Then he crouched back down, gave the dog a few perfunctory pats on the head, and rose once more. “There! I’m done!” And with that, he walked away.

“Ch-Chihiro-kun? I was just messing around... Did I go too far?”

“I’m done with you.”

"Noooo! I'm sorry, Chihiro-kun! I promise I won't tell our senpai or our friends in class! Please forgive me!"

"...Fine, but you better keep your mouth shut!"

I admired the way Enjouji-san casually weaved some idle threats into her plea. *She's a force to be reckoned with, this one.* If anything, it was indicative of their close-knit bond.

"Well, you both clearly had a lot of fun. Did you feel cool?" I asked them. They exchanged a glance.

"A little bit, maybe..."

"Trust me, I never feel cool when I'm with her."

Swing and a miss, it seems. The CRC "It" factor was proving to be even more elusive than I thought.

"Oh yeah! Why don't you play with him, Fujishima-senpai?"

"...I think I'd better not."

"Are you scared of dogs, too? This one's really friendly! He won't bite, I promise!"

"Sadly, that's not the issue."

Out of kindness, Enjouji-san turned Gonta my way. Meeting his gaze, I took a step toward him... and with a loud whimper, he ran off back to his owner, tail between his legs, whipping the end of the leash right out of Enjouji-san's hand. Dismally, I watched him go.

"Animals never seem to like me."

"...Sorry," the two first-years apologized in unison.

"Oh, that's alright. It's not your fault."

I've just got some dust in my eye, that's all.

Once we had recovered from our misstep, we gathered to discuss our findings. The sun had set, and the park's lampposts had flickered to life.

"Well, this looks like a good time to call it a day. Let's head home before it gets any darker," I told them. It was late, and the park had grown quiet.

"Yeah, it's only going to get colder... Oh, but we haven't tried *your* hobby yet, Fujishima-senpai!"

"It can wait."

"What is your hobby, anyway?"

Good question. At this, I paused to think.

Is it... doing good deeds...? No, that's not a hobby. Giving love advice? No. Working for the Outreach Committee? No...

"Let's see... My exercise routine, I suppose."

“*That’s* your hobby?”

“Chihiro-kun, tons of people are passionate about physical fitness. You know, like bodybuilders and stuff! It’s an admirable hobby, if you ask me.”

“...Do you have a fetish for muscle dudes or something?”

“Wh-What are you talking about?! I don’t look at those magazines!”

As they bickered amongst themselves, I contemplated Uwa-kun’s remark. He wasn’t the first to comment on my interests, of course.

Hobbies were defined as something you enjoyed. But whenever I told people what *I* enjoyed, they always looked at me funny, or told me it wasn’t a hobby, or otherwise decided I had to be wrong.

Apparently, hobbies were supposed to be productive and meaningful... Perhaps I was better off finding a “normal” hobby that more closely fit society’s requirements. A more common hobby, like karaoke, or shopping, or eating dessert. But the more I thought about “normal” people, the more I started to feel like an aberration...

“So... we’re going to keep doing this crap?” Uwa-kun asked, and I snapped back to reality.

“...Our investigation, you mean?”

“Personally, I want to keep investigating, Chihiro-kun!”

“Okay, but when will it end? We can’t do this forever.”

“True... Why don’t we give it one more day? We should reach a conclusion by then.”

And so we went our separate ways.

Enjouji-san and Uwa-kun had brought their bookbags with them, so they headed straight home; I, on the other hand, returned to the school to retrieve my bicycle. Hunching my shoulders, I braced myself against the northerly winds and wondered absently to myself: what constituted “going home from school,” anyway?

Did it count as “going home” if I took my bookbag and left campus? Not like I was going back to the classroom. In that case, could I say I’d “gone home early” today?

Not only that, but... in a sense, I’d hung out with friends, too. For me, that hardly ever happened. Was this what it was like for other people? People whose clubs took the occasional day off? Somehow, it was oddly satisfying. For once, I didn’t feel quite so

empty inside.

Is this what it's like for cool people?



Fortunately, no one had any special plans nor any urgent business with our respective clubs after school the next day, so the CRCIFIT was free to meet up once more. Our meetup location: the school infirmary. I was the first to arrive, so I leaned against the wall and waited for my two kouhai.

Then I heard two girls talking nearby.

“Where’ll we hang out today?”

“Hmmm... The usual place, I guess.”

“Yeah, I guess...”

These two young ladies spent so much time together, they had established a “usual place”! Perhaps that sort of close friendship was another key to being cool.

“So have you heard the rumors lately?”

“Totally! The one about the weird thing that’s gonna happen, right?”

“Yeah, that one! What do they mean by ‘large-scale event spanning multiple days involving the students of Yamaboshi High School,’ anyways?”

“Huh? All I heard was that we won’t be able to escape once it starts.”

“Oh my god, that’s creepy!”

“The part you said was a lot worse, if you ask me!”

What an odd rumor. Come to think of it, that boy from yesterday had mentioned something about rumors, too... Evidently this was quite the hot topic. Was it a supernatural phenomenon, or some sort of orchestrated event? Either way, it wasn’t the sort of thing I wanted to hear people gossiping about at school.

So I decided I would ask them for more details... but in the same moment, I made eye contact with a different girl.

“Oh, hey, Fujishima-san!”

It was Kishikawa-san, a girl from a different class, and one whose daily conduct often left something to be desired.

“Hello there, Kishikawa-san.”

“Heard you were hitting on Aiba! You go, girl!”

“Hitting on Aiba...? Oh!”

Clearly she was referring to yesterday, when the two of us had “hung out” in close proximity to one another in my pursuit of mixed-gender friendship.

“Oh my god, you did?! This is my first time ever hearing about your love life, so I kinda wasn’t sure! How’d it go, anyway? Aiba seems like a total virgin, so I assume you had to make the first move.”

“For Aiba-kun’s sake, allow me to clear up this misunderstanding. Our interaction was entirely platonic.”

“Aww, really? And here I was really excited!”

“Sorry, but it’s simply not true. And I’m sure Aiba-kun wouldn’t appreciate this rumor floating around either. Next time someone brings it up, could you correct them for me?”

“Just because you’re not interested in him doesn’t mean he’s not interested in you, y’know!”

“Kishikawa-san, I understand how fun it can be to gossip about romance, but you shouldn’t encourage these things for your own entertainment.”

“Oh, relax! I’m just messing with you! Sheesh!”

“It didn’t sound that way to me, that’s all.”

“God, Fujishima-san, lighten up! Don’t take everything so seriously.”

—*Lighten up. Calm down. You’re too serious. You’re no fun.*

“You gotta relax sometimes or you’ll push people away.”

And with that, Kishikawa-san walked off like she’d lost all interest in me. I looked around for the two other girls, but they were already gone. Now I was alone. Abandoned.

At any given moment of my life, I was always giving it my best effort. I didn’t half-ass a single thing. Some people found this impressive, while others found it alarming. But no matter what, they all had one thing in common: they couldn’t relate. Instead, they kept me at arm’s length for being “different.” They drew a line in the sand between their world and mine.

Every now and then I would hear people refer to me as “superhuman.” But for as much as they may have wished to be more like me, they never once realized that *I* wished to be more like *them* ...

“Hi there, Fujishima-senpai!”

“Oh... Hello...”

I snapped back to reality to find Enjouji-san and Uwa-kun

standing there. Quickly, I put all my errant thoughts into a box and tucked it into the corner of my mind. The real world was waiting for me!

“No club activities today?” I asked.

“They said they’re okay with it as long as we’re back by tomorrow... so let’s wrap things up today!” Enjouji-san declared enthusiastically.

“We may as well see it through to the end,” Uwa-kun shrugged.

With the two of them here, I wasn’t alone... even if I knew it couldn’t last forever. And with these fleeting friends at my side, I found the strength to carry on.

“Alright then... Time to resume our investigation!”

Let the mission begin!



Using the conveniently deserted Classroom 1-B as our base, we worked through all the ideas we could think of.

Was it cool to have close friends?

Was it cool to get together in a big group and goof off?

Was it cool to have an emotional impact on the people around you?

Through trial and error, we experimented around, discussed our findings, then headed off to investigate our final lead:

Was it cool to have a boyfriend or girlfriend? Or, alternatively, was it cool to be seen as attractive?

In the end, all our conversations ended up right back here. No one could deny the aesthetic appeal of being entangled in some sort of romance!

“This has to be it... Nothing could possibly exceed the power of love!” I shouted once we returned to Classroom 1-B for what was hopefully the last time. Truth be told, I was rather hoping love could remain its own separate entity distinct from coolness, but alas.

“I really don’t think having a love life has *anything* to do with being cool,” Uwa-kun retorted.

“But if someone *doesn’t* have an active love life, that’s not very cool either, don’t you think?”

“Point taken. You’d have to be a total hermit to isolate yourself from the opposite sex!”

“Now, now, Enjouji-san. That’s a bit heteronormative, don’t you think? Don’t forget there are people with other sexualities in the world. Our language should be inclusive to reflect that.”

“Oh, of course! You’re completely right, senpai!”

“...I have no idea what you just said.”

Do try to keep up, Uwa-kun!

“So, what about you two? Are you in love with anyone?”

“Wh-What?! I... I think that’s a little out of my league... for right now, anyway...!”

“I’m not really interested in dating.”

“Enjouji-san, you may think love is out of your league, but I’m afraid I must disagree. Everyone has the right to fall in love at any given time.”

“Are you sure...? It’s just kind of complicated...”

“And you, Uwa-kun! You sound like you’re still in middle school, pretending you’re ‘not interested’ when really you’re just scared!”

“Please don’t shame him for it, Fujishima-senpai! It’s not his fault he can’t talk to women! He’s trying his best!”

“Screw you! I just don’t want to waste my time, okay?!”

“Could it be that you... play for the other team? Prefer sausage to tacos? In other words—”

“I understood you the first time, Fujishima-san! And the answer is no, none of the above! For the record, I *do* talk to girls, okay? Tada has a lot of female friends, and we hang out in a big group sometimes.”

“Whoa... You hang out with girls...? That’s kind of devastating...”

“Why would it be *devastating* ? What business is it of yours?”

“I was enjoying the mental image of you getting all flustered around the opposite sex...”

“Quit inventing reasons to feel sorry for me!”

These two have such good chemistry. Could it be that they’re...? No, it would be tactless of me to ask them flat-out. I’ll just have to wait for them to figure it out on their own... But good god, I want to say it so badly!

“S-So, um, Fujishima-senpai... do you have... a love life...?” Enjouji-san asked, once she was done bickering with Uwa-kun.

“Well, let’s see... I dated around in middle school. Both boys *and* girls.”

“What?!”

“Don’t get me wrong—I know the gender binary is an outdated concept. When I use the word ‘both,’ in this case, I mean to say that those are the two genders I dated.”

“I don’t think she was reacting to your word choice, Fujishima-san.”

What part of it was so alarming, then?

“Well, in any case... I haven’t dated anyone since enrolling in high school.”

Admittedly I’d been a bit distracted with... other discoveries.

“Ugh... Is that what I’m missing?! Then so be it! Let’s fall in love, Enjouji-san!”

“What?! With each other?!”

“That’s not what I meant, but... if you’re game for that, I would certainly consider it.”

“N-No... Sorry...”

Alas. Rejected.

“What’s your type, anyway?” Uwa-kun asked me.

“I don’t think I *have* a type, to be honest with you. But it’s been a long time...”

More than two years had passed since my last romance, and there were no new prospects in sight. Was that a bad thing? I hadn’t really thought about it until now...

“And neither of you have a special someone in mind, correct?”

“R-Right...”

“Not really, no.”

“That’s it. That’s our problem. We don’t need to date anyone, but we at least need to find someone we’re mildly interested in!”

That way, their presence would keep us on our toes. This was what had kept us from cool status all this time!

“We’d better find ourselves some romance—posthaste! I’m sure it’s lying around somewhere!”

“Romance has gravity?!” Enjouji-san shouted.

“It’s just a figure of speech! Lest you forget, there *is* such a thing as ‘love at first sight,’ you know. Now let’s find it!”

“Are... Are you sure I can?!”

“It won’t be easy, but you shouldn’t have trouble as long as you set your sights low. Focus not on Mr. Right, but Mr. Right Now! We’re looking for someone who sets our hearts aflutter! Now let’s go sit in on some club activities!”

“Y-Yes, ma’am!”

“This makes absolutely no sense to me. Can I go home?”

“I’m afraid not, Uwa-kun! What I’m asking isn’t rocket science. Surely even *you* know a pretty girl when you see one! And as long as the two of us are with you, you can stare at the volleyball team all you want without it being creepy!”

“I... I don’t...”

“Aha! I saw that little smirk just now!”

“Good grief... You’re such a covert perv, Chihiro-kun.”

And so we decided to walk around campus together and take a peek at some clubs!

First, we observed the baseball team from behind the backstop. They were in the middle of practice, but as this was their off-season, it wasn’t too intense.

“What do you think, Enjouji-san? Any candidates?”

“Oh... I... I don’t know... Based on my purely subjective personal preference, I tend to like guys who have cool hair... or, you know... *any* hair...”

“I see, so a guy’s hairstyle is an important element for you. What about you, Uwa-kun? Any thoughts on the team managers? That one’s a second-year, and that’s the new first-year recruit. I hear she’s very cute and energetic.”

“Yeah, I know her. Eh, she’s alright, I guess.”

“Do you prefer the quiet type?”

“Wow... Chihiro-kun’s actually checking them out...”

“I’m not doing this because I want to! You people are making me!”

Next, we continued on our lap around campus.

“The badminton team!”

“Everyone looks really classy.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“The rugby team!”

“They’re all very manly, but... in a scary way...”

“And they don’t have any team managers.”

“The basketball team!”

“Basketball’s a pretty cool sport, I guess...”

“...I take it the girls’ basketball team is somewhere else?”

“The volleyball team!”

“Wow... They’re really aggressive...!”

“You can say that again.”

“Now for something completely different: the Tea Ceremony Club!”

“...There’s no boys in there...”

“Are you sure we should be leering at them through this window...?”

We continued on our journey, chatting along the way. And as we looked at all the people, I contemplated what it meant to have feelings for someone. To fall in love.

This school was filled with objectively kind, smart, and handsome boys, but none of them felt right. As important as romance was to the human experience, I just wasn’t in the right headspace for it lately. Me, of all people—ironic, I know. Alas, I didn’t have a crush on anyone.

I did, however, love someone... and by “someone,” I mean the entire human race.

The last time I admitted to this out loud, however, my audience laughed and said I “had to be joking” or else I “really got around, huh?” Naturally, I didn’t bother elaborating further. But to be clear, it *wasn’t* a joke. I didn’t joke around about these things.

Of course, I could never quite tell them that. Even if I tried, they’d just assume it was another part of the joke. They would never truly understand.

In middle school I never thought too hard about it, but now that I was in high school, it was all too clear to me: I was different from everyone else. I was... *abnormal* .

Ugh... My usual mood swings are hitting even harder today. Must be all the thinking I’m doing.

I didn’t fit in here. This wasn’t where I truly belonged. And that thought made me want to abandon everything I’d built and fly away to some distant land. Could anyone ever love someone like me?

“Looks like we’ve come up empty-handed,” I muttered as we sat near the main entrance, exhausted from all the walking.

“There were certainly a lot of attractive people, but... I didn’t feel any spark...”

“I wasn’t expecting to actually find anyone, so I’m not disappointed.”

“I see... Sorry for dragging you around, then.”

“Fujishima-senpai...?”

"In the end, we never did learn how to be cool... nor did we find love..."

"Huh...? Wh-What's wrong, Fujishima-senpai?"

"Yeah, you're not acting like yourself. Besides, if I genuinely hated doing this, I would've just gone home by now."

They were trying to cheer me up, and it hit me hard. *What am I doing? I can't act like this!*

"Well, the CRCIFIT was unable to find any conclusive evidence... but I think it's safe to say that romance is a crucial element."

There I was, admitting defeat. I knew my words had no persuasive power, but I pressed on regardless.

"I know I don't have any right to say this, considering I haven't found any special someone myself, but... I hope the two of you will keep looking."

"F-Fujishima-senpai..." Enjouji-san's eyes shone with tears.

"Seriously, Fujishima-san, what's got you down? Why are we having this tragic little moment?"

All the color had drained from the world around me. I was now in full-on "pity party" mode.

"Oh, hey! What's up, guys?"

But then, a voice called out to us. It was a boy with spiky, messy hair and a friendly face. Reasonably tall, reasonably muscular—high marks across the board. Yes, it was Yaegashi Taichi's best friend Watase Shingo, the soccer player, decked out in his jersey and cleats. He and I had shared the same class in our first year.

"Fujishima-san and the CRC first-years? That's a weird combination if I've ever seen one."

"H-Hi there, senpai!"

"...Hello, senpai."

Watase-kun grabbed the sports towel from around his neck and wiped his forehead. "They're making us run laps right now, and I'm dying! Seriously, what is it with sports teams making people run laps in the winter? Anyways... What are you up to?"

Slowly but surely, my monochrome world filled with color once more.

"We're looking for love in the hopes that it'll make us cool."

"Oh boy... I can already tell she's up to no good... Seriously, I'll never understand this woman," he muttered under his breath.

"Okay, so—wait, what? You're looking for love... so you can be

cool...? What?"

"Fujishima-senpai... Y-You have to explain it a bit more or else it won't make sense," said Enjouji-san.

"Not that we really need it to make sense to anyone else, if you ask me," said Uwa-kun.

They were both completely right, of course.

"Good point. Well then, to put it simply... We're looking for a little romantic thrill to spice up our lives."

"Huh... So... you're trying to find a boyfriend?" Watase-kun asked hopefully.

"In my case, not exactly. For now I just want to find someone I'm interested in."

"Oh." He slumped his shoulders... but why was he so disappointed?

"You're in the middle of soccer practice, right? Sorry if we disturbed you."

"No, no, not at all! You're not disturbing anyone, Fujishima-san!"

"Alright then. Glad to hear it."

He was such a good-hearted person. Frankly, it was hard to understand how he was still single.

"Right... Okay, well..." he muttered awkwardly, almost like he was hesitant to walk away... so I decided I would help him along.

"Best of luck with soccer practice, Watase-kun! Let's get going, you two!"

But just as I turned to go—

"Oh, okay. See you... No, wait!"

—he stopped me.

"Did you need something?"

"Well, no, but..."

He was normally a cheerful and confident guy, but for some reason he would always get a bit stiff and formal with me. Almost like he was keeping me at arm's length.

"Okay, I'm just gonna be blunt! ...This is kind of awkward to say in front of the first-years, so you two do me a favor and pretend you're not listening, alright?" He turned back to me. "Sometimes love is... you know... a lot closer than you think!"

"You think so?"

"Yeah, you'd be surprised! It's really not something you need to go out of your way to look for. C'mon, Love Guru! This is basic

stuff!”

“No, it’s really not. Not for me. I’m not like most people... People always tell me I see the world differently than they do... That I’m too serious... That they don’t understand me...”

Great, now I’m whining. Why am I crying about my problems like a little baby? What happened to you, Fujishima Maiko?

Well... at least this way I’m more “normal,” I guess... Maybe I’m just tired of walking this path alone...

“You’re not the kind of person who cares about what other people think of you, Fujishima,” Watase declared.

And for some reason, he addressed me not as *Fujishima-san*, but *Fujishima*.

“I’m not...?”

“I mean, obviously *I’m* not the arbiter of ‘who you are’ or anything. You’re the one who gets to decide that,” he added hastily, gazing into my eyes. “My point is, you have a lot of great qualities. But not everyone in the world is going to appreciate you like you deserve because not everyone values the same things. So if someone doesn’t like you, you kind of just have to let it go, you know? I mean, think about all the famous people who weren’t recognized for their awesomeness until after they died!”

Well, that’s a bit of an exaggeration, but...

“You’re not going to operate at your best when you’re busy worrying about how everyone else sees you! So in my opinion, as your number one fan, I say just ignore them. You do you, girl!”

Focus on myself... not on others...

“You can do things normal people can’t even imagine, Fujishima. Everyone admires that about you... though I’m sure sometimes they might get jealous, too. But me personally? I hate to see you let their opinions get to you. I don’t want you to stumble over this—I want you to charge full speed ahead! Because that’s... that’s what I love about you!”

Here he was, validating my choices. Telling me he loved me just as I was.

Human or superhuman, we were all still just people. No matter how we chose to live our lives, we still had people who loved us—yes, even me.

Suppose, hypothetically, that I would someday be one of those famous people—the sort of celebrity who did interviews or wrote autobiographies. If anyone were to ask me what the turning point of

my life was, without a doubt, I would tell them about this very moment.

Because I'm perfect just the way I am.

"You're right... I lost sight of that. Why on Earth did I nearly let society's view of me dissuade me from pursuing my ideals...?"

Considering I'd only just overcome my obsession with prestige, clearly I had a lot I needed to work on. Fortunately, my friends were always there to help me see the light—first Yaegashi Taichi, and now Watase Shingo. And with this trusted support network, I could find the strength I needed to carry on, all my flaws notwithstanding.

"Thank you, Watase-kun. I don't know how you did it, but... you've set my heart ablaze."

"I... did...?"

"Yes, you most certainly did. I've been rather down in the dumps for the past two days, but now that I've bounced back, I've got the energy to survive a good four months or so."

"Man... When you 'bounce back,' you really *bounce*, huh?"

"Enjouji-san. Uwa-kun." I turned to my fleeting friends in the CRCIFIT. "I'm afraid this concludes our investigation... but our team is not disbanded. Let's keep in touch... and should either of you find a special someone, or discover what it means to be cool, I hope you'll tell me all about it. Only then will we consider our work truly done."

"Right! I... I'll never forget what we accomplished together, senpai!"

"Dude, it's been *two days*. None of us are going anywhere! Whatever... It's been fun, I guess."

And so I received two responses: one heartfelt and sincere, the other not so much.

Two wonderful days. A magical moment in time. Yes, what a beautiful world we live in.

"I promise, I'll find love someday! Let's all support each other on our journeys!"

I exchanged a handshake with each of them.

But before another word could be said, I got a call on my cell phone.

"Sorry, I have to take this... Hello?"

I pressed the phone to my ear. On the other end, I heard the familiar voice of a first-year on the Outreach Committee.

“F-Fujishima-senpai! There was an error on the paperwork we submitted yesterday, and... and we have to do it all over again! I’m so sorry... It’s all my fault!”

“I’ll be right there. I’m familiar with those forms; depending on the error, it’s possible we won’t have to redo everything from scratch.”

“Really?! That would be such a relief! Okay, see you soon!”

Guilt flooded my chest as the call came to an end. “It looks like I’ve got some business to attend to,” I said after a moment.

The other three all grinned at me.

“Classic Fujishima-san.”

“Th-They sounded like they’re in real trouble! You’d better go help them!”

“Yeah, get going. Don’t worry about us.”

From the bottom of my heart, I found myself wishing we could all spend time together again someday. No matter how far I traveled down my destined path, I knew this was the place I could always call home.

“I’ll be in touch with all of you again.”

“Okay!”

“Sure thing.”

“And thanks again, Watase-kun! I must say, you’re quite good at cheering people up. Perhaps you’re even a better advisor than me... See you around!”

“Oh, uh... Right. See ya.”

Now then, it’s time for me to get going. Forward... forward... full speed ahead!

And so I walked across campus, greeting people as I went.

What’s wrong with following my heart, chasing my dreams, or taking things seriously? What’s wrong with putting in 100% effort at all times?

This is the path I want to follow. This is the way I want to live my life. Other people tend to see it as strange... but I’ve decided to accept that. The world can go ahead and laugh at me if they want—and if they do, I’ll just laugh right back. It’s not my fault they can’t keep up!

Who makes the rules? Me. Who’s steering this ship? Me! End of story!

I’m a pioneer, exploring a path no one else has ever walked. I’m going to carve my way forward... today, tomorrow, and all the days

after that. That's where I'll find true fulfillment!

Oh, and if I can find love along the way, well... I'll consider that a tidy bonus. Teehee!

+ + +

As I watched Fujishima-senpai go, my brain struggled to process everything that had just happened... but nevertheless, I felt a tiny hint of affection for her all the same.

"And there she goes," I whispered.

On one hand, she was kind of like a hurricane—completely overwhelming. But on the other hand, she had fears and worries just like me.

"I don't know how we got dragged into that mess, but... now it's all over," Chihiro-kun muttered next to me.

"She's incredible, isn't she?" Watase-senpai commented. "I feel like she might just take Japan by storm someday."

Ummm... Yeah, I don't know about that..

But a moment later, something occurred to me.

"Say, um... This is a random observation... I mean, purely random... and if I'm wrong, feel free to punch me... Eek! On second thought, please don't punch me!"

"Relax! I'm not gonna punch my sweet little kouhai! Now what were you gonna say, Enjouji-san?"

"Watase-senpai... do you maybe... have feelings for Fujishima-senpai?"

I said it! Oh god, I said it! Now I've stuck my nose in his business!

Flustered, I waited for his response... but as it turned out, he was surprisingly rational about it.

"She's got a keen sense of intuition when it comes to romance stuff. That's why people call her the Love Guru or the Goddess of Love or whatever."

His tone was warm and gentle.

"But when it comes to her own love life, she's completely oblivious."

It was obvious just how much he cared for her.

"Hey! Watase! Quit standing around!" shouted the soccer team's club supervisor, and we collectively remembered he was supposed to be running laps.

"Oh crap! Let's keep that between us, alright? We'll talk more

later. See ya!”

And with that, he took off at full speed.

“Hmmm... I have a hard time picturing Fujishima-senpai being oblivious about *anything*,” I mused quietly.

“I can see it, personally,” Chihiro-kun replied. “She talks like she’s some unlovable monster, but really, what she’s looking for was right next to her all along.”

“I guess Watase-senpai was right. Sometimes love is a lot closer than you think.”

What if I’m not as unfit for romance as I think I am? What if it’s right around the corner, but I just haven’t noticed? What if... all I need to do is start paying more attention...?

The next thing I knew, I found myself looking at Chihiro-kun. He looked at me. Our eyes met. We gazed at each other for a moment, just an arm’s length apart. I’d never really noticed before now, but he had very handsome, androgynous features—

“Whoa, whoa, whoa!”

Yelping, I whipped my head away and forced myself to stare straight ahead. My cheeks burned. Then Chihiro-kun followed suit. I glanced at him—his cheeks seemed a little pink, too...

What? What is happening right now? Are we...? No, no, no! Noooo, no, no! Not possible! Not happening! I mean, this is Chihiro-kun we’re talking about! He’s just my friend from class and fellow clubmate, that’s all!

No romance here! No sirree!

+ + +

“So if we just do this for that... See? Looks like it’ll work out fine.”

“Y-You’re right! Thank you so much, Fujishima-senpai! Man, I thought we were screwed!”

“It’s my fault for dumping the paperwork on you without any prior training, and for that, I’m sorry.”

“No, no, don’t be!”

Together, we had resolved the crisis. And after my short break away from the Student Council Outreach Committee, I was ready to work a little overtime to make up for it.

“God, what a relief... Oh, actually, that reminds me. Have you heard the rumors?” my kouhai asked me.

“What rumors?”

“They say the students of Yamaboshi High School are going to be forced into some weird experiment. Supposedly they’re gonna lock us up somewhere we can’t escape or something.”

“Oh, yes, I’ve heard about that,” I replied. “I’m told that a series of supernatural events will take place in there—people swapping bodies, that sort of thing. But it’s all hearsay, so I can’t speak to the validity of... What?”

Over the past two days, I’d heard a lot about some “large-scale experiment” that the students would be “forced” to participate in. It sounded rather strange, and I’d been meaning to investigate more...

Wait, what? Then where did I hear about “people swapping bodies”?

I was sure I’d heard it from someone, but I couldn’t remember when or where. Without a doubt, something strange was going on.

[———]

...Silly me. What am I getting so puzzled about? That’s just the way rumors work—you sort of pick them up subconsciously. Nothing strange about that.

Nothing strange at all.

+ + +

“That reminds me... The other day, Shino-chan was like, ‘The road to cool is a long one, but I’ll try my best! Watch over me, Fujishima-senpai!’ ” I told Inaba Himeko as we took the train home after school.

“What nonsense is she on about now? And Fujishima’s involved? I feel like I should be concerned.” Furrowing her brow, Inaba let out a sigh.

Just then—

“Whoa!”

—the train car suddenly jolted, and I had to grab the handrail to keep myself upright.

“Whew! That was a close one.”

“Dumbass. Pay more attention, Iori,” Inaba scolded me.

“Anyway... The ‘road to cool,’ huh?”

“I wonder if I’m cool, too,” I mused. “Because I know *you* definitely are! And here I thought you were a total geek back in our first year!”

“I certainly can’t complain. I’ve got some great friends and a

great boyfriend.”

“Oh god, now she’s bragging...”

No one could have predicted that our Inaban would change so dramatically. So many crazy things happened—so many choices were made—and they all led right here. It was honestly incredible to think about.

Whenever I paused to look back, I tended to lose myself in all the what-ifs—what if I’d done X instead of Y?—but the scale was greater than that. There were countless factors based on the choices of countless other people. *That* was the foundation upon which “today” was built.

“What’s with the faraway stare?”

“Oh, sorry. I was just thinking, y’know, I’m glad I enrolled at Yamaboshi and joined the CRC.”

Looking back, that felt like the biggest turning point in my life thus far.

“Good grief, don’t get all cheesy on me. Seriously, what’s the matter with you?”

“*You* started it, Miss I-Have-Great-Friends! Honestly, I never would’ve imagined you’d end up all bashful and lovey-dovey...”

“Can we not talk about the bashful crap for once?! ...Though I admit, if you’d told me I’d end up dating Taichi, I guarantee I wouldn’t have believed you.”

“I know, right? But then a bunch of even *more* unbelievable stuff happened, and look how we ended up!”

“Yeah, we certainly went through a lot...”

“Yup! Obviously most of it had to do with you-know-who, but there was a bunch of other stuff, too.”

And all of it was irreplaceable.

“Next year we’ll be busy studying for college entrance exams... Should we make a CRC graduation album or something?”

“Pffft! Getting a little ahead of ourselves, are we? Seriously, we’re not graduating for more than a year! How big are you planning to make this album, Inaban?! Besides, if anything, we should try to hang out more. Don’t forget, we’ve still got spring break to look forward to!”

“Oh... Right... I guess it’s still early... I mean, I’ve never made one before, so I wouldn’t know... Alright then, let’s all go on a trip or something.”

“Now that’s more like it!”

Going forward, I'm going to create even more precious memories with the CRC. What magical moments are in store for me in the days, weeks and months ahead?

As I pondered this, I gazed at ***** next to me...

Wait, what?

What IS this girl's name, anyway?

...Duh! Inaban! Obviously! Inaba Himeko!

What was that brain fart just now? Inaban's my best friend in the whole world. I could never forget her name as long as I lived... Right?

The End

Afterword

It's time for the afterword! But I don't have a lot of space left, so I'm gonna rush through it!

First things first, the *Kokoro Connect* anime will start airing in July 2012! It's been really eye-opening to see my work depicted from a fresh perspective, and I'm confident that my readers will enjoy it! There you have it—the author's seal of approval!

Following the hit manga adaptation serialized in *Famitsu Comic Clear*, a new manga based on the anime adaptation will be published in *Nyantype*! For the latest news on all the *Kokoro Connect* adaptations, you can check FBonline, the official Famitsu Bunko homepage, for periodic updates!

And lest you forget, BANDAI NAMCO Games is hard at work developing a visual novel adaptation as well! I'll keep you posted about it in the next volume—which will mark the start of *Kokoro Connect*'s final arc, by the way. And since it's the grand finale, I'm thinking about splitting it into two parts. With any luck, it'll be so dramatic, we'll land a stage play adaptation next!

Now then, on to the acknowledgments. Shiromizakana-sama: thank you so, so much for everything that you do. Next, I'd like to thank everyone who helped me write this book, particularly my editor—I hope you'll see this story through to its conclusion. And this time, I'd like to add a private message to the new friends I made this spring: without you, I never could have finished this book. Thank you from the bottom of my heart.

Lastly, before I go, I'd like to extend my full gratitude to all the readers who have helped *Kokoro Connect* get this far. Thank you!

—Anda Sadanatsu
June 2012

Inaban x lori
forever! ♡
I really love
female friendship! ♡



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Kokoro Connect Volume 8: Step Time
by Sadanatsu Anda

Translated by Molly Lee
Edited by Adam Fogle

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